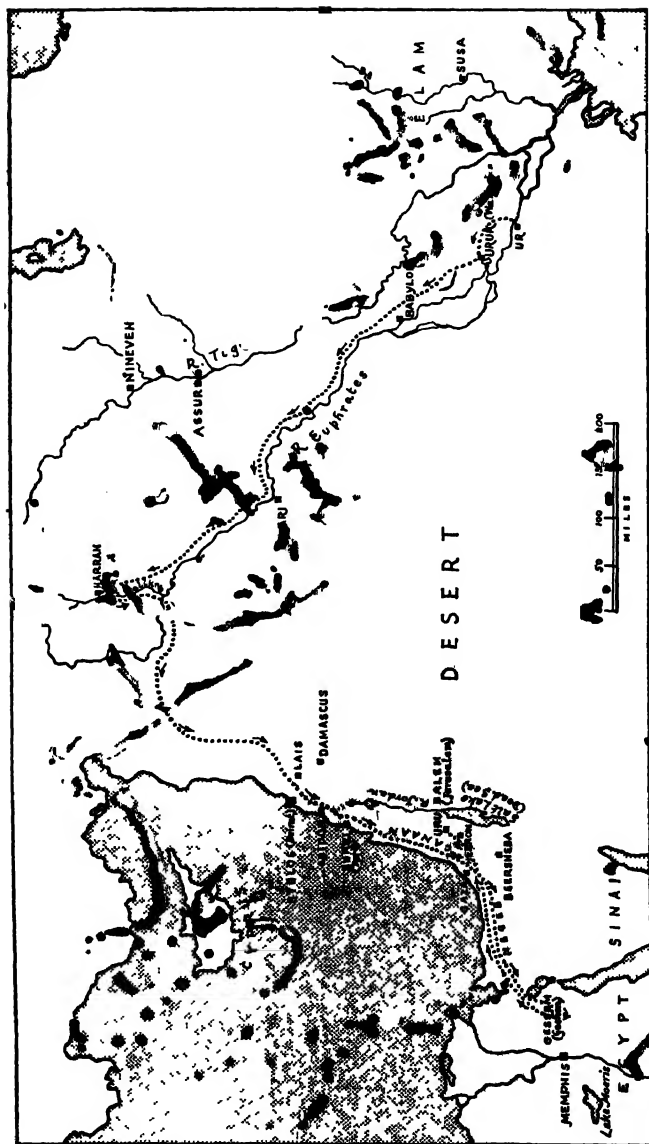


THE COVENANT



THE DOTTED LINE SHOWS THE COURSE OF ABRAHAM'S WANDERINGS

THE COVENANT

*A Novel of the Life of
Abraham the Prophet.*

BY

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Translated by H. C. Stevens



WINGATE.

London & New York

First published 1911 by
ALLAN WINGATE PUBLISHERS LIMITED
12 Beauchamp Place London SW3
122 East 55th Street New York

Set in 11 pt Bembo, 1 pt lead
and printed in Great Britain by
Tonbridge Printers Ltd
Tonbridge

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PART ONE

THE CALL

1

The City of Ur

ELIEZER, CALLED THE DAMASCENE, TURNED BACK TO THE CAMP, TAKING the asses with him. His master, Ab-Ram, went on foot up the great steps leading to the city gate. The second slave, Sur, a young, beardless man, walked behind him, bearing on his head a basket filled with provisions. The broad, stone slabs of the steps were hollowed with many years of wear, and their ascent was so easy that asses and camels had no difficulty in mounting them. The ancient city of Ur, situated on the Lower Euphrates, was built on the slopes of an artificial hill, almost a hundred cubits high, which had been raised by peoples long since forgotten, doubtless even before the great Flood.

Ab-Ram paced deliberately into the pleasant shadow of the city wall. The gateway was spacious, with a shallow arch, and at night the gate was fastened with bronze bolts. The two wings of the gate were covered with bas-reliefs representing a siege of the city. The cool under the arch made it a favourite meeting-place for the city's inhabitants, and also a centre of trade. Here legal and business transactions were usually conducted, and here news and gossip were exchanged. The archway was swarming with hucksters, jugglers, sellers of spells and charms, and fortune-tellers. Rush-baskets arranged along the walls were piled high with flat loaves of bread, hot cakes as round and hard as pebbles, and *debelah*, a favourite sweetmeat made of figs and almonds mixed with honey, and dried in the sun. Clouds of flies buzzed over and around the baskets. In one corner glazed pipkins

and pots were on sale, and cheap utensils made of dried melon skins, for the very poor. Hordes of beggars hung about the gate, crying for alms. The perfume-sellers held up little ampules filled with scented oils. Among the chattering crowd there was no lack of spies, sent out by the *Patesj*, the king's governor, and the priests, anxious to know what the common people were talking about. A king's official was prominently seated on a broad bench, holding scales for the weighing of gold and silver. It was customary for every merchant to carry his own scales, and weights shaped like lions or bulls, in a small bag at his side; but any customer who suspected the merchant's honesty was entitled and even bound by law to appeal to the official to test the weights. Any merchant found guilty of using incorrect weights had one hand cut off.

The money universally accepted was the silver shekel, which was equal to the weight of 320 grains of barley. There were sixty shekels in one minar, and sixty minars in one talent. Though in general the weight of grain always remained the same, the value of the shekel varied. The Babylonian and Elamite shekels were of different values from the Assyrian shekel. Even within the confines of a single state there was a difference between the royal minar and the priestly minar. These variations in weight led to innumerable disputes, so the majority of buyers and sellers preferred to settle their transactions by barter.

At the entrance to the gateway, Ab-Ram halted, for after the dazzling sunlight the interior seemed impenetrably dark. Taking advantage of his momentary uncertainty, a crowd of hucksters clamoured round him, pestering him to buy their wares. He shook his head and flung his broad camel-hair cloak over his shoulder, to give them to understand that he had no need of anything. His face wore a look of disdain, for every free shepherd feels contempt for the dwellers within walls. He was tall, and carried himself erect. The white kerchief covering his head and shoulders, with a black rope wound round it thrice, rose high above the crowd. He halted for a moment before a trader selling spells, who reigned over an array of clay tablets, bricks, and amulets.

'Tell me, where shall I find the habitation of *Adon Taribal*, the spell-seller?' he asked.

'My lord, live for ever! Why should you trouble to go to master *Taribal*? Your servant whom you see possesses the finest of spells. Let your soul make its choice. Is it wanted against demons, or against men?'

'I asked you a question: answer! I need not your spells. Last year you

sold my father a spell against enchantments, and when a priest whom he knows read the tablet he said it contained a list of the date harvest three years ago.'

'The demons changed it,' the spell-seller muttered in confusion. 'Taribal dwells opposite the Tower. You will know the house by the great plates on which *Melek-Melakim*—may he live for ever—ordered his commandments to be inscribed. My spells are good spells; Taribal's spells are worthless,' he added. Ab-Ram did not stop to listen. As he passed through the gate he turned to Sus:

'Hasten to Terah, son of Nahor; give him the food, and say that I will come immediately.'

The slave made a low obeisance, still holding the basket on his head with one hand, and set off briskly along the little street under the wall. Ab-Ram climbed higher up the steps leading from the gate to the temple. The steps were lined with effigies of lions, and of winged bulls with human heads. At one spot the artificial hill on which the city stood swelled into a low, circular mound, and on this elevation the temple, the Temple Tower, and the royal palace seemed loftier than they were in reality. Like all buildings in this flat, alluvial land, they were built of fired brick, covered with gleaming glaze. The bricks of the temple and palace were glazed blue, serving as a background for a painted procession of gods, kings, priests and warriors, prisoners, bulls, and lions. Innumerable figures were engaged in battling, banqueting, receiving tribute, marching in punitive squads, perishing, hunting, or resting. They were resplendent with colour, and beautifully executed.

Above the main entrance to the temple, between two sturdy columns, the procession came to a halt on either side of a broad, flat expanse of wall, distinguished from the rest by its more brilliant azure. In the centre was an enormous effigy of the god Marduk, or Bel, with lightnings in his hand, and the dragon Tiamat flung down at his feet. Marduk was the lord of the temple, the city, and the land; he was patron of the king of Babylon and the reigning lord of Ur, Hammurabi, son of Sin-Muballit. Hammurabi had only recently begun to reign over Ur. The city's inhabitants still remembered how at his command the old bricks had been broken away in order to make room for the new god. Before the coming of the Babylonian, the temple, which had been erected almost a thousand years before by the founders of the great Sumerian dynasty, had served for the worship of the god Nannar-Sip, who sailed above the world in the silver

vessel of the moon. Nannar-Sin, together with the sun-god Shamash, the god Anu, lord of Heaven, the god Enlil who was lord of the air, the god Enki, who commanded the waters, and the goddess Ningal, had reigned over all the cities lying in the valley of the Lower Euphrates and the Tigris. Those days had been times of prosperity, glory, power, and success. Nannar-Sin and his attendant deities had been munificent in their recompense for the offerings made to them. Unfortunately, for some unknown reason he had turned his face from the city, and misfortunes had begun to accumulate. What was the upstart city of Babylon in the eyes of the ancient rulers of Sumeria? Yet the king of Babylon, Sin Muballit, had conquered the land, had slaughtered the resisting inhabitants of Ur, and had put out their king's eyes. The son of Sin-Muballit, Hammurabi, who now reigned, had added to his father's conquests. He had captured Elam and its capital Suza, he had captured Larsa and the ancient city of Mari, where the royal palace had 130 courtyards; he had extended his sway as far as the bounds of Assyria. Intoxicated with power, he sought to make the conquered peoples, the Sumerians, the Akkadites, the Gutians, the Elamites, the Amorites all one people, to fuse them together as the smelter alloys copper and tin. He planned to assimilate the tribes of the south with the tribes of the north, and the hill tribes with the tribes of the wilderness. To this end he had commanded that the laws should be recorded in writing, and should be uniform for all his subjects, binding in all the lands over which his sceptre extended. And he had imposed the worship of a single god—his god, the Babylonian Marduk.

This angered the conquered peoples more than anything else. For each city possessed its own god, who was the special patron of that city's bounds, and of no other. Each city made offerings to its own god, each city glorified its own god in song; no one desired an alien god.

But Hammurabi had succeeded in imposing his will. Though placid by nature, and just, he could not suffer disobedience, and he drowned all resistance in rivers of blood. The city of Ur itself had experienced such a fate. Crushed with cruel punishments, it had submitted at last, renouncing all idea of revolt.

It was true that the descendant of the ancient Sumerian dynasty, the son of the blinded king, retained the honourable title of *Patesi*, or representative of the god; but the god was Marduk Bel, and the exponent of Marduk's will was Hammurabi. It was true that the guard set before the gates of the royal palace wore beautifully fashioned helmets of gilded

copper, the black slaves brought from Egypt kept camels covered with silken cloths and with golden collars round their necks always at the *Patesi's* disposition; but despite this splendour, the legitimate lord of the palace and the city was a shadow without authority or power, who spied on his own subjects at the order of Babylon, and himself trembled lest some common slave should inform Babylon against him.

The true lords of the country, who never yielded to any change, who were afraid neither of the king of Babylon nor (as was said in undertones) of the gods, lived apart, in the Temple Tower, called *Ziggurat*. Even Ab-Ram, a stranger to the life of the city, and a man indifferent to political changes that did not affect his tribe, glanced in that direction respectfully. The tower rose in seven stages, and dominated all other buildings. Each stage was in the shape of a parallelogram, and they grew successively smaller towards the top. The higher stages were reached by steps which wound outside the walls. At times the palace and the temple with their azure walls seemed to dissolve into the azure of the sky, losing their outlines; but the tower, which was quite bare of ornamentation, and of a uniform dark hue, always stood out, like a rock amid broken changing waves. There were no guards at the entrance, yet nowhere in all the land would a man have been found bold enough to cross the threshold uninvited. Before the door of the tower stood a huge granite chalice, polished till it gleamed; its interior surface was covered with circular and radial lines like a spider's web. In the centre a bronze javelin was set at an angle, casting a slender shadow. His father, Terah, son of Nahor, had told Ab-Ram that the priests highly esteemed this chalice; they called it a clock and calculated the time of day by it. Ab-Ram also knew that they divided the day into twelve hours, and the night into as many, but he had no idea what use it all was. Surely the ancient division of the day into six parts—morning, noon, evening, midnight, cock-crow, and dawn—was sufficient for any man?

A little apart from the temple stood yet another stout, square tower, known as the Well of Silence, or the Well of Ashes. Its walls of raw brick were entirely without opening. Narrow steps led up to the truncated top. It looked like a watch-tower on which guards light fires in times of alarm, but its purpose was very different. The interior was filled with ashes, and it served for the execution of men of high rank or birth, who had to be eliminated without a trace, beyond the sight and knowledge of the common people. The condemned man was taken to the top of the tower

and thrown into the ashes. By his own weight he sank deeper and deeper; the ashes filled his mouth and throat, choked and silenced him. If as he struggled desperately he came upon some hard object in that soft, yielding abyss, it was only the bones of some predecessor. No one ever emerged alive from the sombre Well of Silence.

The workshop of the Master Taribal was famous not only in Ur, but throughout all the neighbouring cities. He employed several dozen workers, who mixed clay, shaped it into bricks, tablets, octagons, and cylinders, impressed signs on their fresh surfaces, and then baked them. In a separate courtyard signs were chiselled in stone, and the bronze chisels rang under the blows of wooden mallets. In quiet rooms clients were dictating private letters or legal documents to scribes. A graver called the *heret*, which the scribes wielded with great dexterity, was used for inscribing cuneiform signs. When inscribed, the tablet or brick was put straight into a furnace, where it was carefully baked. Stone was expensive, having to be brought from a distance, so only royal proclamations, and the gravestones of dead high officials were worked in such materials. All the priestly writings, their astrological, astronomical, mathematical and other calculations were also given permanence in stone, but the priests had their own scribes and carvers.

In the room assigned to tablets containing spells, all kinds of amulets, from valuable ones carved in gold or onyx down to the commonest of clay, were set out on a long table. They all bore the hideous faces of demons carved on them, for an evil spirit flees from its own likeness. Beside the amulets was a row of human figures cast in lead, which were used when it was desired to cause someone at a distance to be tortured or killed: To cast the spell, the lead had to be melted, and a piece of hair, skin, or nail from the man condemned to death thrust into it. Some of the figures had arms already dislocated, legs already shackled, or noses and ears already cut off.

As Ab-Ram entered, Adon Taribal hastened to meet him, and with exaggerated affability asked what he desired.

'A spell against the ague,' he exclaimed, when Ab-Ram told him. 'Your servant possesses spells against the ague. Good, ancient - very good, and very ancient spells. Listen.'

He seated his visitor on a bench in the shade, picked up a small tablet from a shelf, and, holding it close to his eyes, read in a slow, solemn tone:

'Thou who dost me injury, who poisoneth me with spittle, who shaketh me with thy breath, who treadeth me down with thy feet, who terrifieth with thine eyes, who threateneth me with death, be thou accursed, O demon, and destroyed! I curse thee, thy poisonous glance, thy death-bringing steps, thy treacherous knees, thy glittering eyes, thy shoulders, thy hands, thy belly. May the god of the moon Sin destroy thee and fling thy carcass into the lake of fire and water . . .'

At the end he took a deep breath, for he had read the spell as spells should be read, without pause. Then he mentioned again that the tablet was very old. Ab-Ram smiled with pleasure. He knew the value of things that were old.

'Now listen to another spell, equally effective in its power':

'O Adonai, hasten to my aid. Evil spirits are in my house, evil spirits are in my body. They shake my bones as a storm shakes the trees. They burn my skin as the wind from the wilderness scorches the grass. They roar in my head like dry rushes. They howl in my ears like a troop of jackals. They stand on my right side, they stand on my left. I tremble with fear, my teeth chatter. O Adonai, extend thy hand to me in aid. Free me from the evil spirits, from the enchantments that bind me. May the power shield my head . . .'

But preter the first, Ab-Ram said; he thought the bolder curse more likely to be effective than humble entreaty. 'I will take that tablet, but first I ask you to read it to me again, that I may remember; and by repeating it I shall rejoice the sick man's spirit.'

'Most willingly will I read it.'

Adon Taribal read out the spell a second time, while Ab-Ram repeated each word after him in an undertone. When they had ended, the important moment, the moment of bargaining, arrived. The merchant valued the spell at twenty shekels, which Ab-Ram considered excessive.

'For twenty shekels I can buy a strong young ass,' he exclaimed.

'A strong young ass will not cure an old man sick with the ague, but this tablet will. If the sick old man is your father, may it be of sevenfold potency.'

'You have knocked the weapon out of my hand, Taribal.' Ab-Ram laughed. 'Truly, it is my father who is sick.'

He paid without further protest, and, placing the tablet carefully in his bosom, went out. Taribal accompanied him as far as the street. At the entrance stood the stone tablets, half as high again as a man, which the

huckster at the gateway had mentioned, Taribal drew Ab-Ram's attention to them.

'I am entrusted,' he said, not without pride in his tone, 'with the task of inscribing the royal proclamations for our city. Similar tablets have been raised in Babylon, in Uruk, and in every city. All the laws are inscribed on them. There has never been anything like them before. Of what value is memory? Today any stripling, provided he possesses the ability to read, can boast of acquaintance with the law and will be regarded as wiser than a grey-head who does not know his letters. By the gods! What times we are living in! What times!'

He sighed as he said farewell to Ab-Ram. His visitor's camel-hair cloak and kerchief (turbans were worn in the city) had emboldened him to unburden himself. The dwellers in-tents do not repeat words unnecessarily. Taribal would not have spoken so openly in front of a city acquaintance.

The house of Terah, son of Nahor, was like all the other houses in the city. It formed a rectangle of whitewashed brick, with blind exterior walls, and with only one entrance. A stone balustrade surrounded the flat roof. The city's inhabitants used the roofs as sleeping chambers in summer-time, and as people had been known to fall off the roof in their sleep, Hammurabi, son of Sin-Muballit, who was obtrusively interested in all his subjects' doings, had laid strict responsibility for their safety on the city builders. If a householder fell and broke his leg or arm because his house lacked a balustrade, the builder's leg or arm was broken. If a similar misfortune happened to the householder's son, a son of the builder had to pay the same penalty. Only if a householder's wife or daughter were hurt was it sufficient for the builder to pay a fine. There was no exception to these punishments, so in no city subject to the king of Babylon were roofs to be seen without balustrades.

The wooden door leading into the house was stout and heavy, a sure defence against the heat of the day. A carved bronze knocker announced the arrival of a visitor. Before the door a stone gutter led away the water with which the host washed his visitors' feet. A narrow entrance, long and dark, led to a stone-paved courtyard. In the centre of the courtyard was the usual pond, with a fountain watering the plants set round it. All the rooms of the house opened on to the courtyard, over which a coloured silk curtain was drawn at noontide.

It was a matter for astonishment to many that Terah, son of Nahor, and

goel or the pastoral tribe of Hebrews, lived in a city, rather than with his tribe in tents. The reason was to be looked for in years long past, when the youthful Terah, a youngster fond of amusement and greatly interested in life, had joined the retinue of the goddess Ningal as priest of the third degree. In her service he had learnt many things, and had found that he had some skill as a carver. He was unable to develop such gifts in his nomad encampment, so he had brought his tribe to dwell under the walls of Ur, while he himself lived in the city, and quickly gained the priests' esteem as a sculptor of images of the gods. His wife had died many years before. His eldest son Haran also was dead, leaving a son named Lot, while Terah's second son, Nahor, was incapable of any effort or energetic movement owing to his corpulence. So Terah had entrusted the headship of the tribe to his third son, Ab-Ram. He himself visited the camp more and more rarely, for he grew more and more unused to the simple pastoral life, and more and more like the city's permanent inhabitants with every year that passed.

When Ab-Ram entered the house he went straight to the low altar on which the household gods, the teraphim, were standing. The teraphim were two small stone figures, poorly carved, and of indefinite outline, as though they had suffered from the erosive action of water. It was believed that they had been made before the Flood and had been given to Eber, the founder of the tribe, by Noah's son, Shem. So they were regarded with great reverence, and Ab-Ram, who had passed by the temple with indifference, knelt with sincere piety before the altar, taking a piece of resin from his wallet and laying it at the feet of the teraphim.

'Hurry and come here!' croaked an old man lying on a couch in one of the rooms. 'May the angel of death prove as slow in arriving as you have been.'

'May the angel of death never set foot inside this house,' Ab-Ram answered gravely. He knelt down again, before the couch, and touched the pavement with his forehead.

Blessed be all thy days, father!

'And thine, and thine!' the old man answered carelessly. He was withered and small, and as mercurial and garrulous as Ab-Ram was restrained and taciturn. He made no attempt to repress his irritation and spoke swiftly, not allowing his son to say a word.

'Obed has shown me the provisions Sur has brought. Dainty tidbits for a sick old father, I must say! Have your wives lost their wits? Truly,' he

corrected himself, 'it is difficult for them to lose something they have never possessed. Things are going ill, very ill, with the camp. I send word that I am sick and need something to restore my strength, and my daughters-in-law send me bread. . . . Bread! Cannot I get as much bread as I need from the hucksters at the gate? I wanted cake, good, tasty cakes made with buttermilk, as tender as a child's belly, or cakes made with olive oil, lightly risen. And I was brought flat cakes fried in tallow . . . My stomach cannot digest sheep's fat. I am old, I am sick. Surely Sarai has time enough. For she has no children, has she? . . . Why didn't she bake some cakes for me?'

'My heart grieves within me,' Ab-Ram declared. 'I shall take the women to task for their negligence.'

'Bread suitable for slaves, new wine, little butter, and *dibs* undercooked,' the old man continued his reproaches. 'But who takes any thought for an old father?'

'I shall rebuke them sternly,' Ab-Ram said again. 'When I return, I shall send you all you desire. And here,' he added, 'is a spell which will cure you of your sickness.'

'A spell? Show me! The ague is robbing me of my last strength. Is it a good spell? You haven't been cheated?'

'I will repeat it to you, father.'

Ab-Ram knitted his brows, and after a moment's thought repeated word for word the spell against the demons with glittering eyes and feet that bring death. In those days the human memory was well exercised, and it was much more reliable than it became two thousand years later.

'Good, good!' old Terah muttered, somewhat mollified. 'Where did you buy this tablet? How much did you pay for it?'

'I bought it from Taribal on the square before the temple. I paid twenty shekels.' Ab-Ram involuntarily sighed, for he was frugal by nature.

'Taribal knew you were buying the spell for me, and yet he demanded so much?'

'I did not tell him who I was, father.'

'Pity, pity! You are always unnecessarily taciturn.' Taribal would have let you have it cheaper. I know him. Did you see the tablets with the commandments of the royal laws outside his house? The carving at their top was done by my Shāmir, for Taribal's slaves are skilled only in inscriptions. . . . It is a good spell, it has come down from the days of the old god. . . . I like the old god. I prefer him to the Babylonian, who has

not restored health to any of us. By the silver vessel of Nannar-Sin! If the *Patesi* were to learn that Taribal is selling spells containing the name of the old god the adon might well find himself in the belly of a copper bull with a fire lighted beneath it. Brr . . . Brr . . . You brought the spell betimes, for I am beginning to shake again.'

'When did it come upon you, father?' Ab-Ram asked solicitously. He took off his cloak and covered the sick man with it.

'Yesterday at this time. I was angry because that dog Obed broke the head of a statue all ready for service. It is needed for tomorrow morning, the priests were to come this evening to take it away. That fool let the statue fall to the ground and the head broke off. I cursed, I shouted, I sweated with anger, and then the demon took hold of me. . . .'

'Why was Obed working on the statue, and not Shamir?'

'Shamir is no longer with me. I sold him at the last new moon. . . .'

'You sold Shamir, father? What was his offence?'

'He had committed no offence. I had to sell him. O, I am sorry about Shamir. He was intelligent and capable. Obed is a lazy dog. Curses on his mother! He'll get the whip if he doesn't repair the statue. . . . I have already notified the priests that I shall send it myself tomorrow morning, I have ordered Obed to remove the head from another statue of Marduk, which has broken legs. . . . Under the paint it will be impossible to see that the statue has been repaired. . . . Cover me with another cloak.'

'Are you only carving Marduks now, father?'

'I am not carving anything now. I am bored. Formerly Shamir shaped them, now Obed does it. I only put them right. The priests think I still do it all. But I have grown tired of it. My fingers would gladly mould ordinary people, or children, little, merry, amusing. . . . My fingers don't want to mould Marduk's exasperating mug, or the crooked lightnings in his fist and that horrible beast. . . .'

'Have a care, father!'

'I can speak, no one will hear me. The walls are thick and the slaves stupid. My life has grown hateful to me, Ab-Ram my son. My occupation has grown hateful. The city has grown hateful. It is all because of those two Babylonians, Marduk and Hammurabi. It is impossible to breathe freely. The men at the gate say the *Patesi* gets five couriers and more from Babylon every day. The first speeds so fast that his camel falls on its nose, and he delivers the message: "I, Hammurabi, the favourite of the gods, have learnt that three trees have been cut down in thy forest. Inform me

who was the culprit, by whose order it was done, and for what purpose?" Before the *Patesi* has had time to read it a second courier hurries in, and hands him a second letter. "I, Hammurabi, guarded by my gods, have learnt that Neru, the owner of a garden, is drawing water from the canal. Prove, punish, and report." And already a third courier is galloping up: "The ropemaker Zabbai reports that the brother of his mother has taken his garden. . . . Inquire into this, and report . . ." The fourth courier arrives: "Are the canals cleaned after the recent flood? Why is the canal blocked in the field of Refuh?" Hammurabi's not a man, he's a demon. The *Patesi* curses the day his mother bore him. They say he is building a great house for the storage of the royal tablets and copies of his own reports. The royal inspectors check the date harvest before the fruit is ripe, and write down the number of measures the leaseholder has to surrender to the king. And he is fettered in shackles if he supplies less. The same with the vineyards, the wool, the figs, the garlic. And the king is everlastingly in need of more men. For building temples, for digging canals, for the army. Every *Patesi* is bound to supply young lads to him. . . . And where are they to be obtained? They carry them off from wherever they happen to find them. See that he does not lay his hands on ours. Life is growing bitter. Even the priests are complaining, they praise Marduk only with their lips.'

Ab-Ram gave his father an inquisitive look.

'Father, will you permit your servant, your son, to ask you a question? If you do not wish to answer, punish my audacity.'

'What is all this preliminary to? Ask on.'

'Father, do you believe in the gods?'

'What?' The old man began to stammer. 'Do . . . I believe?'

'Softer! Do you believe in Marduk?'

'In Marduk? No. . . .'

'But in Nannar-Sin?'

'It is better to live in accord with the gods,' Terah answered. 'Nannar-Sin was a good god. The god of our fathers. . . .'

'But he allowed Marduk to drive him out of his temple, so surely he must have been weaker than Marduk.'

'Why are you questioning me on such a matter?'

'I desire to know which god is the greatest. . . .'

'What is that to you? . . . What do you want?' he shouted at a slave who had appeared silently at the entrance. (He was surely listening. Ab-Ram

thought.) Obod, a Gutian slave with a round head, prominent cheekbones and a snub nose, knelt before his master's couch and hoarsely announced that the work was finished.

'Let me lean on your shoulder,' I eran said to nus soft, 'so that I may go and look at the statue of the god.'

'By no means, my father; I shall take you on my back and you will not suffer any weariness.'

Ab-Ram squatted down, and the old man scrambled on to his shoulders, seating himself astraddle. Ab-Ram gently straightened up, bent his back again at the door, and went out into the courtyard. The old man was not much of a burden. As Ab-Ram felt the little weight of his father's withered, emaciated body, shivering with the ague, on his back and arms, he felt a great tenderness for the old man. How right it is that the world respects and reveres the aged! A grey-haired man is a rich accumulation of experience, wisdom, all the varied turns of fate. There is more despair in the family at the death of an old man than at that of a child, for children are continually being born, but no one can replace an old man. With him a whole epoch descends to the tomb. Who would not feel more regret for the loss of a spreading tree with stout branches than a tender young shoot?

The largest room in the house was used as the workshop. The clay was kneaded in wooden troughs, and was frequently drenched with water. At first sight the repaired image of Marduk seemed perfect, but when Terah looked more closely the trace of the join showed clearly through the paint, and he could not contain his anger. In the attempt to appease him Ab-Ram advised him to adorn the god with a necklace.

'That's a stupid idea!' his father snorted. 'Marduk is not the goddess Ishtar. Marduk doesn't wear jewels.'

'If it be your will, father, your son will go to the priests, to ask them to delay the collection of the statue.'

'They will not agree! . . . they will not agree. Tomorrow forenoon Nanna-Tum, the wealthiest merchant in the city, is offering his son in sacrifice. The altar is to be renewed and decorated. Ha, but perhaps a necklace would do! By the gods! I would have to give my most precious necklace in order to stop the priests' mouths. Carry me now to the treasury.'

The treasury was the smallest room in the house; in it was a wooden chest bound with bronze. Terah was a devoted collector and amateur of the beauty created by men's hands, and in the chest he kept his favourite

jewels and valuable trinkets, which he had spent a lifetime in collecting. Ab-Ram carried his father to the room, and the slave shifted a couch across to the chest. As he opened the lid, Terah forgot his sickness and affliction, plunging his hands with childish joy into the midst of his treasures. Ab-Ram watched his beaming face tenderly and indulgently.

With two fingers the old man lifted out a golden goblet covered with fine workmanship. Dancers in long flowing dresses were dancing, holding one another's hands. Terah son of Nahor gazed rapturously at their graceful forms. His breath clouded the gleaming surface. He carefully wiped away the moisture with his robe, sighed, and put the goblet back in the chest.

'I wish I could carve like that,' he complained as he reached for another article.

'I myself don't know which is more beautiful,' he confessed. 'That goblet, or this?'

'It has been made from the eggshell of the great bird of the desert,' Ab-Ram surmised.

'You are wrong, son. That is not eggshell but clay, white, hard, and translucent. Beautiful, more beautiful than glass. . . . Carefully!' he exclaimed, though Ab-Ram had no intention of touching the fragile gewgaw.

'Where did you get it, father?'

A Sidonian merchant brought it from an island called Crete, lying in the Great Sea, from the royal city of Caratos. The king of those parts eats his food off such shells, more valuable than gold. . . . It was for these two pieces that I sold Shamir. . . . Are you so surprised? The merchant was insistent, and would not let me have them for anything else. So I had to . . .'

'You exchanged a strong young lad for these trifles?'

'I was very upset. Shamir was intelligent. He guessed my thoughts. He was a fine carver. But what is one to do? I could not let the occasion pass, so I let him go.'

'You should have got rid of Obed.'

Obed was at the market, I was afraid the merchant would not want to wait. I desired these beautiful things with a great desire. . . . Now look at this, my son.'

He took out mirrors of polished silver set in gold, perfume caskets of white ivory and of ivory tinted red and green, a stiletto with a gold handle

over which a goat clambered through a bunch of grapes made of large pearls, a crystal goblet with a pattern cut in the glass, representing coloured fishes and green water-plants. When Terah poured some wine from a pipkin into the goblet, the fishes seemed to swim rapidly, and the plants began to sway, stirred by the current.

'Isn't that beautiful?' he asked in a voice hushed with admiration.

'It is beautiful, certainly,' Ab-Ram replied indifferently. He was gazing straight in front of him, his mind still thinking of Shamir.

'You haven't any understanding whatever of these things!' Terah exclaimed in sudden anger. 'You're a noodle! The only beauty you know is a pasturage, and your music is the nocturnal howling of jackals. It's a waste of time to show you. Of you all only Edith has any understanding of these things. She could not gaze her fill at this golden goblet. Truly,' he laughed, 'she was most interested in the dancing girls' dresses. She said she would make herself one like them. . . .'

'Has Edith visited you, father?' Ab-Ram asked in surprise.

The old man looked like a child who has inadvertently given himself away.

'She came to see me,' he admitted, 'because she knows I am acquainted with the priests. She wanted to walk in the procession in honour of the goddess Zirbanit. . . .'

At this news Ab-Ram was not so much astonished as shocked.

'And what answer did you give her, father?'

'I told her she was to repeat her request in her husband's presence. That did not seem to please her.'

Old Terah drank the wine from the goblet, wiped it, and carefully replaced it in the chest, then lay down on the couch.

'That is all Edith has a mind for,' he said. 'Never before has it happened that Hebrew women took part in those obscenities. I know what goes on there . . . I have seen them. . . .'

He smiled cheerlessly, perhaps in regret for his past raging youth; or perhaps out of pity for himself.

'It never has happened and will not happen, Ab-Ram now assured him.

'Lot, the son of Haran, is to blame for the woman's laxity. Why did he take a foreign woman from a coastal country for his wife? It is idle to seek womanly honour where Baal reigns. Counsel him to give his wife a beating and drive her to work.'

'Lot will not do that. He has no authority whatever over her.'

'The crow will peck out the eyes of the child who honours not his parents; infamy will cover the memory of the woman who has no respect for her husband. By the ancient god Nannar-Sin! What will become of the tribe of Eber? Fat has encased the eyes and the mind of one of my sons. The other keeps a barren woman, though it is infamous not to raise a descendant of one's own seed. My grandson is afraid of his own life. . . .'

'Evening is coming on, father. You intended to look for a necklace. . . .'

'Pay heed to what I say!' the old man barked.

He began to grope again in the chest. Taking out three necklaces, he hesitated which to offer to the gods. He regretted every one of them, for they were all precious and beautiful. One was of onyx and agate, ornamented with lions' heads carved in gold; the second, of cornelian and crystal, tinkled with trinkets of various shapes. Finally he selected the third, seemingly more modest, but of unusually fine workmanship; the broad collar was woven of lapis lazuli and garnets interlaced with twisted gold thread. Its colour changed as though it were a weave of azure and dark purple. Terah weighed the necklace in his palm with rapture and regret.

'This has come from Egypt,' he explained. 'In Egypt the goldsmiths make marvellous things. I am sorry I have never been in Egypt. The priests will rejoice, they know a precious thing when they see it. Pity, a great pity that my necklace should go to those insatiable maws. . . .'

He was worn out with regret and weariness; his hands and legs began to shake.

'The demon is attacking me again,' he groaned. 'Give me the tablet. Quickly!'

He fell face downward, convulsively pressing the spell with both hands to his breast. Ab-Ram went to the altar on which the two roughly shaped teraphim were placed and, standing in the attitude prescribed for prayer, erect, with his right hand raised, he fervently pleaded with the tribal gods to protect Terah, son of Nahor, from all evil.

2

The Faces of the Gods

ALL OVER THE LAND OF CHALDEA THE MONEY, WEIGHTS, AND MEASURES were based on the unit of sixty, which was used by the majority of the wise and ancient nations. But seven remained the sacred number, the number of the gods and spirits. There were seven rulers in the heavens, seven lords of the underground, seven evil demons, seven good demons, seven planets, and seven days in the week, each day reserved to a separate god. In the temple to which Terah's slaves, Obed and Hamil, assisted by Sur and supervised by Ab-Ram, carried the image of Marduk, seven rows of columns gleamed in the twilight, seven side chapels surrounded the main nave, seven altars waited for sacrifices, seven steps led up to the high altar.

'I have welded the fastening of the necklace,' Terah explained to his son before Ab-Ram left to go to the temple. 'Human hands will not remove it, no one's eyes will notice the defect. Tell the priests: "Terah son of Nahor has had a dream. He dreamed that Marduk Bel stood before him and said: 'Give me the necklace which you obtained from Egypt.' On awakening, Terah son of Nahor took the necklace from his chest and hung it round the god's neck. Touch not this ornament, for it has been put there by the will of Marduk.'"

'I cannot say that, father. Forgive my lack of learning. If they ask why Terah gave the necklace I shall say that it was in his piety.'

'Listen to my words, and not to your own head. I know the priests, you do not know them. Speak as I have told you. But if they should remove the necklace and see the mark, tell them: "gold will erase that mark." And give them a piece of gold.'

Ab-Ram attempted to object, but at last he yielded to the old man's wishes. In any case, he found the priests engaged in great preparations, and they did not waste time asking questions. Satisfied with the perform-

ance of his task, Ab-Ram went to the entrance and shouted for the slaves. Hamil and Sur appeared at once. Obed was still helping to set up the image. Ab-Ram stood by the wall and waited. Above his head hung seven rows of great tablets which contained all the interpretations of dreams, and all day long crowds of people gathered at this spot, troubled by their dreams of the previous night. The priests of the third degree listened to their stories, collected two shekels in payment, then chose the fitting interpretation from the corresponding tablet. Dreams were divided into lucky and unlucky, indifferent and ominous, those which affected the fates only of the dreamer and his family, and those which were of significance to the whole country. This last group included dreams of dogs, which were held in universal contempt.

'If thou dreamest,' said one tablet, 'that a black dog has entered the house and lain down on the couch, terrible disasters will come upon the land.'

'If thou dreamest that a yellow dog has entered the royal palace, an enemy will take possession of the state and the city will be burnt to the ground.'

If any dream were so unusual as to be unforeseen by the priestly imagination, and so could not be related to any of the tablets, the dreamer was charged twice as much and was sent to a priest of higher degree, who could expound and interpret the most astonishing of visions.

Dreams and omens played a large part in the life of the inhabitants of Ur. All manner of phenomena, from the smallest to the greatest, from an early sneeze to a shower of falling stars, could be used for fortune-telling. The group of priests most highly esteemed by the people was that of the *baru*, or clairvoyants, who could tell the past and the future. The gift of second sight which had been developed in them from childhood was often passed down from father to son. The *baru* did not participate in the blood sacrifices, they had a high estimation of their dignity, and rarely resorted to the petty artifices proper to the ordinary fortune-teller, such as ventriloquism and the interplay of mirrors.

Like all the children of his day, Ab-Ram had a strong belief in the significance of dreams; but as he could not read he was not greatly interested in the tablets. He heard steps behind him. He turned and saw not Obed, but a young priest attired in the blue robe of a *baru*. He approached Ab-Ram familiarly.

'Greetings, Ab-Ram, son of Terah. Your father, Terah son of Nahor,

has moulded a beautiful statue. Your servant desires to know why he adorned it so richly.'

Ab-Ram should have answered: 'Terah son of Nahor had a dream. . . .' But there was an obviously mocking look in the priest's eyes, and he decided not to conceal the truth.

'There is a blemish on the statue's neck. Terah son of Nahor desired to appease the god with a valuable gift.'

'Terah son of Nahor has committed sacrilege. No defective statue may stand in the temple.'

Ab-Ram was momentarily taken aback, but he quickly recovered.

'My father, Terah son of Nahor, assured me that if rubbed with gold the blemish would vanish without trace. He did not have time to do it himself.'

Regretfully he took a fine gold coin from his wallet and handed it to the priest.

'I will see whether it is as you say,' the priest said.

He went away. Meanwhile, Obed had approached as silently as always, and stood waiting. Ab-Ram was inwardly boiling with fury at the priest's effrontery.

'What is the name of that *baru*?' he asked Obed.

'Sep-Sin,' the slave replied.

'How do you know?' Ab-Ram asked suspiciously.

'He frequently visits my master.'

Ab-Ram was satisfied, and said no more. They went on waiting. A few minutes later Sep-Sin returned, the same mocking look in his eyes.

'Terah son of Nahor was right,' he announced. 'The blemish will vanish when rubbed with gold. But the coin you gave will not be sufficient. You must give one more. . . .'

'O Gods, teach my soul patience!' Ab-Ram thought. Without saying a word he took out another gold coin and handed it to the priest, who smiled as he put it in the wallet hanging from his girdle.

'Son of Terah,' he asked abruptly, 'do you know which of the gods is the greatest?'

Ab-Ram went rigid. 'Marduk, son of the god Ea and the goddess Damkina, is the greatest,' he replied.

Sep-Sin clapped him on the shoulder:

'It is well that you know.'

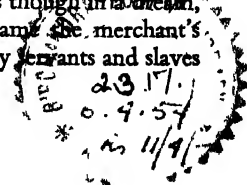
'Obed is a spy,' Ab-Ram thought. Aloud, he asked:

'May I return with my slaves to my father, and then depart to my flocks?'

'You cannot depart now, for the sacrificial procession is about to enter the temple, and it is forbidden to leave while a sacrifice is being offered up.'

He turned away and joined his fellow priests. During the last few moments the interior of the temple had been filled with a large number of priests. Before the altar in the depths of the temple stood a high priest in a blue and green robe; a tiara towered above his grey head, a pallium studded with jewels hung over his breast; in one hand he had a knife. The pallium and tiara distinguished him from the priests of the first and second degree, who were all dressed alike. This degree included the *issaku*, who made offerings of wine and milk, burnt incense to the gods and anointed them with oils; the *sangu*, who directed the ceremonies; the *kipu* and *satami*, who were in charge of the temple treasury; and the *pasisu*, who conducted the choirs and the music on harps and flutes. Priests of the second degree included the priests of the sacrifice, who killed the animals with all the skill of slaughterers; their assistants; and the augurers, the soothsayers, the interpreters of dreams, the unbinders of spells. The priests of the third degree prepared the wood for the altar, removed the blood and all defilement, and during orgiastic ceremonies gave their masculine strength in honour to a goddess. Altogether, the priests of the temple numbered about a thousand, all of them, with their families, their slaves, and the families of their slaves, living on the offerings made to the gods.

Drawn up in two rows according to their rank, standing motionless and dignified, they watched the merchant, Nanna-Tum, as he brought his son up to the altar. The merchant, a man in the prime of life, and magnificently attired, walked at the head of the procession. Behind him came the child, a boy only a few years old; he had a chaplet of flowers on his head, and was attired in a long white robe, open from top to bottom. He had been stupefied with strong wine and the juice of roots, which had the effect of crazing the victims, and he looked about him with dilated black eyes. His mother, also befuddled with the drink, followed close on his heels. Her breast glittered with jewellery, long rings hung from her ears, a *hezem*—a large gold nose-ring—lay on her lips. She walked as though in a dream, her eyes fixed on the child. Behind these three came the merchant's numerous family, and they in turn were followed by servants and slaves



laden with gifts. The procession moved in silence, entirely concentrated on the effort to avoid stumbling or coughing, or even breathing noisily, for the least violation of the prescribed ceremonial made the sacrifice ineffective. Passing slowly through the temple, they reached the steps of the altar, and halted before the high priest. Two *isaku* removed the robe from the child, leaving only the chaplet on his gleaming curls. He stood bewildered, beautiful, naked. With a look of unconcern on his face, the father gently pushed his son towards the high priest, who laid his old, bony hand on the child's neck. The knife whistled through the air as the priest raised it in preparation. Apparently sobered by the grip, the child gave a piercing scream. It was answered by another scream; aroused from her stupor, the mother howled like a wild beast. The two voices died away almost as soon as they arose. The high priest squeezed the boy's throat with amazing strength; Nanna-Tum's brother silenced his sister-in-law with a violent blow of his fist, and servants dragged her into a side chapel. The father stood perfectly still, with the same look of unconcern on his face; but sweat beaded his forehead. The high priest brought the great stone knife down with all his force, and made a deep, broad gash in the child's breast. The blood spurted out. A miserable cry, like the call of a bird, sounded through the temple. The high priest flung the quivering body on the stone table, and opened the wound, taking care to see that the blood, the favourite drink of the gods, should flow copiously over the altar and down its sides. He thrust his hand into the open breast, tore out the little heart, the quivering liver, the skin of steaming entrails, and fixed his eyes on them in a gaze that boded no good. Evidently the omen was unfavourable. The *sangu* priests, one with a flaming torch, another with resin, a third with tarry sticks, went up to the dead body; the resin was sprinkled over the corpse, and the torch set to it. A flame started up; there was a hissing sound as the blood was licked by the flames, a crackle of resin; the scent of burnt flesh filled the temple. A choir of priests raised a song in honour of the great Marduk:

'Who is the highest in the heaven?

Marduk is the highest in the heaven.

Who is the highest on the earth?

Marduk is the highest on the earth.'

Ab-Ram waited impatiently for the ceremony to end, so that he could depart. The spectacle he had witnessed made no more impression on him

than the slaughter of a lamb. Ever since the god El had sacrificed his son Yeduda in order to save the land from disaster, thousands of years before, the sacrifice of the firstborn had been regarded as just, fruitful, and worthy of imitation.

But Ab-Ram was out of luck. Before the merchant Nanna-Tum had withdrawn from the altar on which the remains of his son were dying into ash, a further procession appeared at the wide-open doors; this time three oxen were being brought for sacrifice. The cattle were adorned with flowers; and necklaces of gilded bronze, representing lions devouring gazelles, hung round their necks. The throng of people in the courtyard indicated that still further sacrifices were to be expected. Would he have to wait here till the evening?

Unexpectedly, Sep-Sin came up to him. He smiled, quite unaffected by the latent hostility of Ab-Ram's gaze.

'I know your thoughts,' he said cheerfully. 'You think I have come to relieve you of a third piece of gold. You are wrong. I have come to bring you your release. I will send the slaves back later, when the entrance is free. Follow me.'

He passed round a pillar into a side entrance used only by the priests. They went down steps into a spacious crypt immediately below the altar. It was a gloomy place. Long niches in the walls were filled with many urns containing the bodies of infants sacrificed to the gods immediately their mothers had borne them. They were placed in the urns head downward, and the mouths were sealed with resin. Each lid bore the names of the child's parents, so that the gods should know who had made them the sacrifice.

'If I had a son I would not sacrifice him to the gods,' Ab-Ram thought. 'But I have no son.'

Sep-Sin turned to him as though he had guessed his thoughts.

'Nanna-Tum has sacrificed his firstborn, but he will gain no profit from it,' he remarked, as he waved the dying torch.

'So the god will not grant him his wish?'

'He cannot grant it. The child cried out, the mother cried out. . . . When he wishes, the high priest can kill the child so effectively that it has no chance even to groan. But Nanna-Tum desires something that is not possible, and so . . .'

They passed out of the crypt into a dark passage that sloped downward.

'Your words, Sep-Sin, seem sincere. Would you deign to tell your

servant why Obed revealed that the image of the god had been damaged, and why he repeated my imprudent words to you?

'I might answer, son of Terah, that we priests can discover much greater secrets than these, and that would be as true as the day. But I will admit to you that Obed did reveal them to us.'

'I shall take steps to see that he is sold at once.'

'Why deprive your father of a slave to whom he has grown accustomed?'

Ab-Ram looked at him in astonishment:

'But he listens to his master's conversations, and carries tales.'

'Do you think that if your father bought a new slave he would not listen and carry tales? Believe me, Ab-Ram, Terah son of Nahor will not get any slave other than the one we wish him to have.'

'I am sure my father's other slave did not carry tales. . . .'

'That is why he was sold. We sent Terah a merchant with Cretan wares for sale; we know how to manage your father. . . . I myself ordered Obed not to return to your father's house until the merchant had departed with the other slave.'

'What do you want of my father?' Ab-Ram exclaimed indignantly.

'Be calm, son of Terah. We want nothing. We have our people everywhere, in every house.'

Ab-Ram was put in an ill humour, and they walked along without speaking. The torch made more smoke than light, but far ahead of them he could see daylight. The sight comforted him, for he wanted to get out of this place as quickly as possible.

'I did not come to you of my own choice,' Sep-Sin began again. 'Nergal Sar noticed you standing by the pillar.'

'Who is Nergal Sar?'

'Man! Open your eyes and your ears! Nergal Sar is the old and most venerable Sanga-mahhu, who knows all the secrets of the earth. He asked me: "Who is that man?" I told him: "a man who wishes to know which of the gods is the greatest. . . ."'

'But I know! Did I not say that Marduk . . .?'

'Have no fear, Ab-Ram, Sanga-mahhu told me! "If that man desires, bring him to me and I will reveal to him that which his soul covets. . . ."

'I would never dare! I am a simple man, and unlearned. . . .'

'Believe me, son of Terah,' Sep-Sin answered in a serious tone, 'even

the king of Babylon would consider himself happy if the great and venerable Nergal Sar were to say of him: "bring him to me."

They reached the entrance, which was closed by a bronze grille. The priest shot back the bolt. Ab-Ram found himself at the foot of the mound on which the temple was raised. He sighed with relief.

'Blessed be all thy days, Sep-Sa!' he exclaimed hurriedly as he walked away.

3

Dwellers in Tents

ON THAT SIDE OF THE CITY WHERE AB-RAHAM HAD EMERGED FROM THE temple there were no fine houses with courtyards and fountains. As far as the city walls, and even beyond, his eyes took in the sight of the poor quarter. The wretched hovels were crowded so close together that an ass could pass only with difficulty between them. They were built of clay mixed with chaff, and were shaped like a cone with an open top. A low opening at the base served as entrance. The hole at the top let in the light, let out the smoke, and during the rainy season allowed streams of rain to pour in. The rain and wind often caused a hovel to crumble, and where a whole family's habitation had been a heap of clayey mud was left.

Beyond the last hovels extended a shallow valley. Down its centre flowed the River Euphrates, muddy, yellow, turbid, for the water was not yet clear after the spring floods. Every little hollow was filled with water. The fields were intersected with canals, and covered with fertile slime. On the farther bank, a great navigable canal linking the Euphrates with the Tigris added its roaring waters to the river. The current was swift, for the twin river Tigris ran in a channel higher than that of the Euphrates. At most seasons of the year the river and the canal were crowded with boats, and especially with heavy goods rafts, which had leather bags filled with air fastened along their sides to give them added buoyancy. Today, though the Chaldeans were famed as the most daring navigators of the time, boldly sailing over the seas, the watery highroads were deserted, for the recent floods had made navigation very hazardous. The waterside plants, including reeds as tall as trees, were swarming with cranes, herons, black and white storks, swans, and innumerable smaller kinds of waterfowl. The banks were also the breeding-grounds of reptiles, snakes, and frogs. The barley harvest was already being gathered. In some parts the reapers were wading up to their knees in mud, but this did no

hinder them, for they did not trouble to gather the straw, but cut off the stalks about a handspan below the ears. As they reaped they laid the corn down, with the ears first to the right, then to the left, tying each sheaf with a rope in the centre. Ancient custom ordained that the first stooks must be decorated with crimson anemones. Any ears that fell to the ground were not to be gathered up, for they belonged to the poor. And so the people from the mud-hovels watched the harvesters with longing eyes. They were allowed to go and glean in the fields only when the reapers had departed.

Wheat and barley were sown everywhere. True, they grew wild wherever there was a little moisture, but the cultivated crops produced far greater yields. And so Hammurabi, who watched over all matters affecting his realm, had written to his governors: 'Know you not that the fields are the life of the state? Have respect for the man of the fields. Give him good barley to sow. Let him plough lightly, so that the glebe should not dry out.'

This last command was of some importance, since famine came to the rich, fertile Chaldean soil only when it was allowed to dry out so thoroughly that the ploughshare could not turn it over, and the scattered seed was blown away by the wind.

Walking briskly, Ab-Ram passed the *kuduru*, or landmarks, which marked the field-bounds; they were shaped like a great egg with the narrower end thrust into the ground. The surface of the *kuduru* was inscribed with threats and curses against anyone who shifted the landmark. Beyond them extended meadowland, pasturage, earth that had lain fallow since the creation of the world. Ab-Ram felt at home there.

He gazed with pleasure and pride at the numerous flocks and herds which showed black and white in the distance. He could see three separate flocks, one belonging to Ab-Ram's elder brother, Nahor son of Terah, one to Lot, who had inherited the portion of his father Haran, son of Terah, and one to Ab-Ram himself. He owned bullocks, cows, goats and sheep. The cattle were brown and shaggy, with short legs. Tractable and docile under a good drover, if left to themselves for any length of time they grew wild and dangerous. Woe betide anyone then who provoked the bulls! Surrounding him in a ring, they attacked him with lowered horns. They had been known to be victorious in fights with lions.

The sheep were small, but were valuable because of their thick and heavy tails, in which all the animal's fat was concentrated. The sheep's

tail was a great delicacy; the fat was used for lighting, and it was regarded as the gods' favourite tidbit when sacrifices were made.

A drumming of hoofs and a cloud of dust aroused Ab-Ram from his thoughts. A herd of cattle was tearing towards him on its way to the river. The bulls were infuriated, they were ploughing the ground with their hooves, bellowing menacingly. Ab-Ram recognised them as his, and shouted to the herdsmen who were running after the herd. His senior herdsman, Yahiel, came up to him and bowed low before him.

'Hibal, the herdsman of the son of Haran, has let his bulls come among our herd again,' he panted. 'The bulls have kicked and gored a cow in calf, the one that limps. Now she will surely bring forth a stillborn calf. We are driving them to the water to cool them down.'

The herd passed, followed by a pack of thin, mangy dogs with blood-shot eyes. They tucked their tails between their legs and looked about them fearfully. They guarded the herd, but they would not come near a man. They were not called by name, and lived only on what they caught for themselves.

Ab-Ram walked on with knitted brows. He had had enough of these continual complaints and hurt to his cattle through the negligence of Lot's herdsmen. Lot was no more obeyed by his men than he was by his wife.

Now the encampment was close at hand: three rows of black tents. Women and children were swarming round the tents, and before each one was a fire, with a column of smoke. The smoke rose steadily into the sky, which was now turning rosy. Soon the most beautiful time of the day, the cool of the evening, would be coming on. The smoke rose like so many columns supporting the sinking sun. A tall figure came out from the camp to meet Ab-Ram.

His face cleared as he recognised his wife, Sarai. She was coming with her favourite gazelle at her side. It had been brought up in the tent from its earliest days, and was named Sebi. Sarai was an unusually beautiful woman, swarthy, and of erect carriage. In the ease of her movements and the way she carried her head she seemed like a young girl, like her own favourite gazelle. But a closer look dispelled the illusion of youthfulness, revealing the fine furrows round her eyes and the silvery threads in her black hair. Only her features remained unmarred in the purity of their outline, and her eyes had not lost their sparkle. Sarai, Ab-Ram's only wife, was barren, and so she had kept her girlish figure, her flat, hard belly, her slender thighs. Her breasts had never given suck, her belly had

never known the movements of pregnancy. This shameful deformity was a never healing sore to both wife and husband. They were half-brother and sister, coming of the one father, and old Noa, Sarai's fostermother, often muttered that her lady's sealed womb was due to this too close affinity. Whatever the reason, Ab-Ram had the right, and even the duty, to set aside his barren wife; or at least to take another who would bear him children. But he had lived for thirty years in this fruitless marriage, and had not taken another wife, despite his father's and brothers' importunity. Sarai was proud, jealous, and impetuous. She could not bear to think of having to live with another wife beside her. What if she did retain the title of first wife? The wife who bore her husband a son was the first. Ab-Ram knew Sarai would rather die than take second place in his life. But in any case, he loved her, and his conduct was dictated not only by compassion for her. This magnificent beauty, who today was beginning to lose her good looks, but who once had aroused the admiration of all who looked on her, lived only for him; she had no other thought than of him. She was his most faithful comrade. He had not sent her away, he had not taken another wife, and he felt no regret, though he did regret the lack of a son far more than others suspected.

Seeing her husband, Sarai hastened her steps and fell on her knees before him, bowing low to the ground in greeting. He raised her up and put his arm round her.

'Did you guess that I was coming, woman?'

'Oh my lord, all day I have been bored without you, and have turned my eyes continually towards the city.'

They went with arms round each other. Sarai was rather shorter than her husband. Sebi bounded along, first in front, then dropping behind to play with Sur. Ab-Ram took a sidelong glance at his wife's swarthy face beneath the shade of the white veil, and asked her in a casual tone:

'Woman, would you like to take part in the celebrations in honour of the goddess Zirbanit?'

She looked at him in astonishment.

'Would my lord permit me?'

'But if I did, if I said: "go"?''

She flushed, and pouted her lips contemptuously.

'Not for anything would I go. They say it is a disgusting obscenity.'

'So I expected you would answer, Sarai.'

He smiled at her; but as they were now close to the encampment she

fell behind, to follow her husband, as befits a woman. The leather tent-flaps were raised, revealing the interiors with their couches of sheepskins. A crowd of naked children, as noisy as sparrows, was running around the tents. Persistently driven off and as persistently returning, the dogs sniffed avidly at the smell of food, and growled at one another over a bone. At the sight of the man who deputed for the head of the tribe, and whom all regarded as the true head, all the servants and slaves bowed to the ground.

'Greetings, Ab-Ram, son of Terah.'

'Blessings be on your heads.'

The tent of the tribal chief was made of black goatskins, stitched together, but it differed from the others in being larger and finer. A transverse ring fixed near the top of the centre pole gave it a cupola shape. A rough curtain divided the interior into two parts, the men's and the women's sides. Outside the tent a girl slave named Ketura was mixing dough in an earthenware kneading trough. Her companion, the Egyptian Hagar, was churning butter in a sheepskin bag hung like a cradle from a tripod of three sacks. Measuredly and swiftly she pulled at the spring fastened to the bag, until the cream, flavoured with scented herbs to give it a bouquet, began to bubble. Without pausing in her labour Hagar bowed to her lord and lady, watching them with eyes painted in the Egyptian fashion, to extend the line of the lids up to the temples. On the farther side of the tent a cooking stove shaped like a large, inverted, bottomless pot was smoking. There were transverse notches in the walls of the stove, and old Noa, Sarai's fostermother, was plastering barley cakes round it. A fire of dried camel-dung was burning inside the pot, and the flat cakes baked perfectly on the heated walls, being held in position by the notches. When a cake was done it fell away from the stove. Then the old woman swiftly baked it on the other side, making sure that it dropped off into the right notch. These fresh, crumbly cakes were covered with cream, and made good eating. But not every cook liked to bake them on both sides, and this had given rise to the popular proverb: as sticky as unturned bread.

For baking meats or boiling pots an open fire was used, or flat stones heated red hot. But meat was only rarely eaten, usually to do honour to a guest or to celebrate some happy family event.

Eliezer the Damascene came running from the end of the camp to welcome his master. Like Noa, he was a slave who had been given his

freedom years before, but had voluntarily pierced his ear a second time and had remained with Ab-Ram, for he had no desire to live elsewhere. He was both servant and friend. As the servant gazed devotedly into his master's face Ab-Ram could not but reflect that it was pleasant to have no fear of spies in his own camp.

Sarai diligently washed her husband's dusty feet: a duty she could not entrust to any slave. Ab-Ram threw off his cloak, retaining his white, black-striped robe. The sturdy slave Ketura brought him a rolled bundle of skins. Sarai squatted down beside her husband to wait on him. The other members of the household sat in a circle on the ground. Old Noa distributed plates of food. Besides the barley cakes with cream they ate fresh young corn grains, crushed, fried in butter, and spread with honey. For drink they had milk. They ate as was fitting: seriously, slowly, and in complete silence.

They were disturbed by the sound of hurrying footsteps. Noa raised her head discontentedly. Sella, the slave of Lot's wife Edith, hurried up, panting, with an empty pot in her hand. Realising that she was interrupting the meal, she fell on her face, then looked eloquently at old Noa, showing her the empty pot.

'What does she want?' Ab-Ram asked, wiping the fingers with which he had been picking up the corn grains.

'I suppose your fire has gone out again?' Noa surmised. 'Has your mistress sent you to us for coals?'

'For coals and embers,' the girl confessed, with a very apologetic look on her face. 'We cannot get the fire going for the evening meal.'

Noa laughed sarcastically.

'Get the fire going now for the evening meal? Are you intending to eat when the jackals come out?'

'This is the third time this moon that Edith has sent and asked us for fire,' Sarai explained to her husband; she shrugged her shoulders eloquently.

'Is it quite out?' Noa asked.

'Nothing is left at all. Only ashes.'

'Why didn't you cover the fire?'

'My mistress ordered me to comb her hair, and then I had to wash her garments. . . .'

'Ye gods! Isn't fire more important than hair and garments?'

'Give her some embers,' Ab-Ram interrupted impatiently. 'But slave,

tell your master, the son of Haran, these words from me: "Thus speaks Ab-Ram your goel. Before retiring today, come to my tent."

Ketura poured some embers into the pot and covered them with dry grass. A dense white smoke curled round the cover.

'I have been my mistress' servant for many years, but I have never yet run to another tent for fire,' Noa muttered contemptuously, when the girl had departed. They all turned back to their meal. After clearing the plates, Noa and Ketura set before them a basket filled with small, bitter-flavoured peaches. They sucked the juice out of them with great relish, throwing away the peel and the stone. The crimson glare of the west flooded the world with a rapidly fading glory. Hagar finished churning the butter and, unhooking the bag, carried it with both hands to the tent. As she went she leaned sideways, walking gracefully and easily, despite the weight. Cheap bone bracelets rattled on her swarthy, slender arms. The calls of the herdmen and the trumpeting of buffalo horns could be heard in the distance, for from all parts the herds and flocks were moving down to the water to drink - first the bulls, then the cows and calves, then the heifers, and last of all the goats and sheep. Ahead of the bulls two herdmen beat the reeds with sticks and blew the horns to scare off any attacks that might be lurking among them. Terrified by the trumpeting and the sound of the reeds being beaten, the water-fowl circled high above, crying and flapping their wings. The hawks and falcons hovering invisibly in the zenith had been waiting for this moment, and they dropped like stones on to their prey. Floundering in the trampled mud, pulling out their hooves with difficulty, the herds turned back from the watering spot. The world lost its purple hue, and turned grey and cold. The first harbingers of the night, the jackals, gave tongue in the undergrowth. The camp dogs answered their howling with angry barks. Bats flitted swiftly, swiftly and quietly, round the tents.

Ab-Ram stretched himself out on his bundle of skins.

'Ah, Sarai,' he remarked, 'life in a tent amid the herds is more beautiful and joyous than life in the city.'

'Of a truth, my lord?' she whispered distrustfully. 'Without waiting for a reply, she added:

'Have you sent for the son of Haran to reproach him about Hibal? You are wasting your words. His herdmen pay no heed to him.'

'My father, Terah son of Nahor, gave me a command for him and his wife. And he gave me one for you, Sarai.'

'For your servant?' she exclaimed inquisitively. 'Speak, my lord.'

'It pains my soul to have to repeat his command to you, Sarai. Terah son of Nahor complained to me that the food you, Milcah, and Lot's wife sent him was common and poor. Bread, and flat cakes fried in fat. Little butter, young wine, undercooked *dibs* . . .'

Sarai started up, crimson with anger.

'It is not true, my lord! Noa, Hagar, Ketura, come here quickly! Awaken Sur! Let him come here!'

Ab-Ram vainly tried to restrain her. When the slaves ran up she repeated and refuted her father-in-law's unjust complaints. Old Noa accompanied her in a shrill voice, Hagar and Ketura confirmed her words. Sur, disturbed from his first sleep, nodded agreement. Terah son of Nahor had been deceived. The slave who had taken the basket from Sur had evidently eaten the delicacies and put in their place bread and sour wine bought at the market. '*Dibs* undercooked! My *dibs*!' Sarai cried. (*Dibs* was the name of a brown-coloured jam, as thick and sweet as honey, made from the juice of the ripest grapes, cooked on a fire for an hour each day for a whole month, and then beaten with twigs from sunrise to sunset.) 'I cooked it myself from one full moon to another. And the basket was filled with light, perfect cakes. May a snake eat out the eyes of that greedy, dishonest slave! May scorpions crawl over his couch, may the dogs defile him! May the demons never let him rest! May the earth cling to his feet! Woe, woe! Do Ab-Ram son of Terah and Terah son of Nahor think the food was prepared by all three women, by all three daughters-in-law? By the silver vessel of Nannar-Sin, by Enu and Anu! Neither Milcah nor Edith gave even a flat scone. Not one handful of dates, not one skin of wine! It was all given by me, by me!' she raged. 'Milcah said she couldn't keep up with cooking for her husband, and Edith hadn't the time. That delicate lady who cannot even keep a fire alight for the whole day! That red-haired foreigner from across the sea! She hasn't the time!'

The women went on and on, forgetting the respect due to the man who was present. Ab-Ram at last brought them back to reason, but he judged in his heart that they were right. Obed had eaten the best tidbits. Whatever Sin might say, that dishonest servant must be sold as soon as possible. Eliezer the Damascene emerged from the darkness.

'Son of Haran, your nephew is coming, and his woman with him.'

The excited women quietened down, for guests should be welcomed with calm and pleasant faces.

'I expect the red-head has made a new garment which she wishes to parade in before us,' Sarai muttered as she went into the tent.

Edith, Lot's wife, whom Sarai had contemptuously called "red-head", had done her hair artistically in three rolls, one above the forehead, and one on each side of her face. Her head was wrapped in a fine veil confined in a valuable fillet. She was attired elegantly, and it was difficult to believe that this fine lady lived in a tent of black goatskin, rather than in a splendid city house, reclining on cushions beside a fountain, with a slave to fan her. Her outer garment consisted of two silk kerchiefs, the one red, and the other dark blue. The red kerchief was thrown across her right shoulder, the blue across the left, and at the waist they crossed and were held in place by a silver chain. Several necklaces glittered over the two-coloured dress thus formed. Amulets hanging from her ears peeped from under her auburn curls, a gold *nezem* gleamed in her nose. Sarai's dislike of Edith was greatly intensified when she noticed this last ornament, for she herself did not possess a *nezem*.

Lot, the son of Haran, Terah's dead son, was handsome, but he was completely eclipsed by his magnificent wife. He was a diffident man, and his face wore a permanent look of embarrassment. He bowed low to his uncle and guardian, Ab-Ram led him to the men's part of the tent, where Sarai gave them wine in a pitcher. Edith seated herself on skins in the women's part, carefully adjusting and spreading the folds of her fine raiment. It was dark in the tent, so Noa lit a clay lamp, in which a sheep's tail replaced the usual wick and oil. The tail gave an excellent light, and filled the air with the pleasant smell of grilling meat. Sarai set *dibs*, *debelah*, peaches, and some last-year dates before the guest. Lot's wife ate fastidiously, raising the *nezem* with one finger before each bite. She politely praised the *dibs*. Sarai was flattered by the praise, and she told of the wrong Terah's slave had done.

'It must be Obed,' Edith surmised. 'He has cunning eyes.'

'How do you know?'

'I have seen him once. . . . I don't remember when. . . . I am glad I did not send anything. I would hate to think that my cakes were feeding a slave.'

'You'll send something next time!' Sarai remarked emphatically. 'The just course will be for each of us to take it in turns to provide for Terah son of Nahor. I've already done my part.'

'Milcah certainly won't do anything, Edith replied carelessly. 'The gods have made a bottomless pit of Nahor's belly, nothing can ever fill him. As for me, I haven't the time to cook for my husband's grandfather. I do not possess as many slaves as you, aunt. I have children. . . . And there is so much to do when there are children. . . .'

'Two daughters . . . a lot to boast about!' Noa muttered in the corner.

'Where there are daughters there will be a son. My womb is not sealed. . . .'

Sasai turned her head away: the blow had hurt. Noa spat with anger. Edith smiled with satisfaction, and threw her gold *nezem* upward with a toss of her head.

'Truly, son of my brother,' Ab-Ram was saying to Lot, 'never yet has it happened in the tribe of Eber that a wife behaved wilfully and shamelessly. In the eyes of the gracious gods as well as of men the purity of the race is regarded as something of the highest worth. Nothing can take the place of the race, wrong done to the blood can never be righted. And a raging woman left unwatched by her husband can do such a wrong. Edith's desire shows that she is not afraid of shamelessly exposing herself, and her visit to Terah son of Nahor without your knowledge was a wilful act. A woman and a child are as one. A child and a dumb creature, an ass or a camel, are also as one. When an ass or a cow tramples your vineyard, or breaks down a canal sluice, whom do you reproach? Surely you do not reproach the ass or cow and expect recompense from unintelligent cattle? Son of Haran, the owner is responsible for the animal, the mother for the child, the husband for the wife.'

He stopped, for Lot to reply. But his nephew said nothing. So he went on:

'Your father, Haran, was the son of Terah, who is the son of Nahor, who was the son of Serug, who was the son of Reu, who was the son of Peleg, who was the son of Eber, who was the son of Salah, who was the son of Arphaxad, who was the son of Shem. To be able to trace your line back for many generations is a great honour, son of my brother. Children born of slaves or of loose women have no line. You call them by the name of their mother, not that of their father. Among the tribal children running about the camp there may be bastards of Nahor, or of mine, for youth is extravagant with his seed. But none of us calls any of these children his son and heir. Only through the upright and lawful wife is the

line continued. The gods have not given me any children. Nahor's boys died in their childhood; only Tebah, the son of his concubine Reumah, is left to him. I long since decided that if Edith bears you a son he will be the heir of all my herds and the head of the tribe. But if your woman does not change her behaviour (and can a leopard change its spots?) I shall not do so. I would rather take as my own son the son of Eliczer the Damascene, who is faithful, and his wife is honest. .

So far Lot had listened in silence, but now he raised his head.

'Uncle Ab-Ram! My wife has not done anything wrong. She asked about the festival of the goddess because she is inquisitive. She is fond of raiment, of dancing, and amusement, because she is young. . . .'

'Even a child knows the kind of tribute paid by men and women to the goddess Zirbanit. . . . A woman who is drawn to profligacy soon becomes a loose woman if her husband does not restrain her. Your younger daughter is two years old. Why has Edith not begun to carry again? A woman bearing or suckling a child has no thought of evil things. . . . Son of Haran my brother, why is your wife not with child?'

His nephew suddenly reddened. Dropping his eyes, he stammered indistinctly. Ab-Ram gazed at him sternly.

'If the truth is as your face testifies, then remember that I am not only your guardian, but your judge. Terah son of Nahor has made me head of the tribe in his place. So long as he does not change his will I am the judge of every Hebrew. I have spoken.'

Lot rose; he looked depressed. Ab-Ram added:

'I shall deal myself with your herdmen. Go in peace.'

A slender and golden sickle-moon floated up. The light southerly breeze called *Darom* brought the scent of flowers and herbs to the camp. The jackals were calling to one another in the bushes. Lot and his wife departed. Ab-Ram seated himself on the sand before the tent, wrapping his great camel-hair cloak around him. Despite the lateness of the hour he did not feel inclined for sleep. Above him the sky seemed an upturned goblet of dark blue crystal. The stars shone out more and more as the goblet appeared to grow deeper. During the years of his service in the temple, Terah son of Nahor had picked up some of the wisdom of the priests. Later he had passed on his knowledge to his sons. As Ab-Ram recalled his father's instruction he tried to recognise the *Hiades* which heralded rain; the constellation of *Kimah*, on which omens were based; *Nimarad*, the founder of *Babylon*, whom the gods had set in heaven; the star of the

goddess Ishtar, brighter than all the others, and the Spear, the Arch, the Vulture, and the Ears of Corn. Among all these innumerable, glittering, golden eyes he did not know whether he was naming them aright. He also recalled that in the priests' opinion, as Terah had passed it on to him, the stars did not remain motionless like nails in the blue, as ordinary people thought, but floated along tracks which they themselves had designated since the ages, tracks which girdled the earth. And that the stars visible to the eye were only a small part of the stars with which the sky is sprinkled, and each had not only its appointed path, but a measure of time in which it must travel that path. But who had appointed those paths, and subjected the stars to his law?

Although he would not have been able to put it into words, Ab-Ram vividly felt that everything around him – the stars and the night, the wind rustling in the reeds, the sleeping camels, the nocturnal whispers and scents, even the jackals whining in the undergrowth – was a whole governed by harmony. Someone must rule over this whole, someone higher and more powerful than all else. Who was He? Who had set the hinges of the world and had ordained the successive phases of the moon? Who had surrounded the land with water? Who commanded the sun? Even if it was true that, just as Nannar-Sin commanded the moon, so a separate demon, or spirit, governed every star, yet beyond all of them must exist a god older and greater, a *goel* of all the world. What was His name? The priests said that the sun, Shamash, was a great god. But at this moment Shamash was sleeping. He had sunk into the sea and would not arise before dawn. So during these times there was no god. He was absent and asleep. Yet Ab-Ram felt, and seemingly all the world felt with him, that God is. Everything respired with Godhood. Godhood overwhelmed, penetrated all things. Then how was that God to be named?

‘Can a mortal man come to know God?’ Ab-Ram thought. ‘When I see an ant carried away by a little stream of water I can pick it up and set it on dry ground. But even though the ant crawls over my palm and up my arm as far as my brow, it will not recognise who I am, and it will take my hair to be blades of grass. Can it be that man comes into contact with God in just the same way, every day, every night? Who is He? Where is His habitation?’

If he had confided these thoughts to anyone else they would have been regarded as blasphemy, and he would have been sternly reminded that – under the sway of the favourite of the gods, Hammurabi – the supreme

lord of heaven and earth, of people and stars was Marduk-Bel, and there was no equal to him. And then in an undertone the speaker would have added the name of the patron god of his city or his settlement. But Ab-Ram, a free shepherd, not subject to any king, would have doubted the accuracy of this answer. The gods changed often, as often as the ruler; one might even say that they were dependent on the ruler. But if the king established the gods, the king must be stronger than the gods; for the lord appointed the subject, not the subject the lord. The king was a mortal man. And Hammurabi's remains would one day be enclosed within the tomb. But the world would remain. . . .

'Many kings rule the earth, many gods inhabit the heavens. If it is as difficult for them to live in harmony as it is for kings, if there were not a still stronger lord to restrain them they would long ago have shattered the heavens to pieces and flung the stars down to the earth. Within the bounds of the Babylonian state Marduk is recognised and worshipped; in Nineveh it is Ashur; on the coast of the Great Sea, in the land from which Edith comes, it is the great and cruel god Baal; in Egypt and the Black Land it is Ammon. Each of these gods is extolled as the one god who reigns over all others. Does it not follow that in reality not one of these gods reigns? If a human tribe there must be a head responsible for the whole, otherwise there would be no order; even a herd of beasts has its leader, to which it submits; and the great bowl of earth covered with the great bowl of heaven, and populated by innumerable creatures and spirits – surely it cannot but possess some supreme Ruler? The Ruler of the world should be all-knowing, high above all earthly potentates, a true *melek melakim*, king of kings, Adonai, the Supreme Lord.'

It was not the first time Ab-Ram had been troubled by such thoughts. During the day a man's mind and hands are occupied with labour, and the sun, the fervent face of the god Shamash, dazzles him. The day is filled with hubbub and worry. The night, with dignity and silence. It was pleasant to think at night, only it was a pity he had no one with whom to share these thoughts. None of those who surrounded Ab-Ram felt such longings. All the people he knew believed in good and evil demons. They were afraid of the evil ones and tried to win their regard, caring not at all whom the demons obeyed.

Ab-Ram did not know any priests, and did not wish to know any. It was generally reported that they knew all the mysteries, but they repelled him with their insatiable greed and their hypocrisy. Nor, for that matter,

could he have talked with such learned men. Ah, if he only had a son. . . . A son who would be interested in the same things as he was, would think as he thought. . . . An old head is more experienced, a younger head more volatile; they would help each other.

He sighed, and went into the tent. The frugal Noa had put out the sheep's tail lamp, leaving only a small, glimmering wick for the night. Though feeble, its flame was sufficient to repel demons. In its flickering light Ab-Ram noticed that his wife was watching him.

'Why are you not asleep, Sarai?'

She made no answer; but when he lay down beside her she began to weep.

'What are you shedding tears for, woman?' he asked impatiently. Doubtless she was grieving over the food Terah's slave had eaten.

He gave voice to his supposition. She shook her head.

'Why didn't you send me away, long ago?' she asked unexpectedly, through her sobs. 'You would have had children by another wife. . . .'

He felt ashamed. Had she overheard his secret thoughts? How did she know? He gently stroked her head.

'I did not send you away; Sarai, and I am glad I did not,' he said. He could not bring himself to say anything more comforting.

4

Caught Up into the Air

THE DAY PROMISED TO BE HOT, AND WITHOUT WIND. PROFITING BY THE stillness of the air, Ab-Ram sent his men out to collect ladanum. The shrub known as the ladan was a low, small bush, which in the hot season exuded a thick scented resin used for the manufacture of perfumes and incense. It lost half its value when the wind blew dust on to it, but when gathered on a still day it was of great worth. The men went out armed with short leather whips to collect the ladanum, whipping the bushes again and again. When a thick layer of stiffened resin was accumulated on the thongs they scraped it off into a clay vessel and resumed the whipping. In one day a strong man could collect a full pot of ladanum. The women had a different method: they scraped the resin off the goats' beards. The goats enjoyed nibbling at the ladan bushes, and their beards went stiff and heavy with the resin. Old Noa used to boast that the goats would gather more ladanum for her in a day than the men could beat out with their whips.

After seeing that the work was going satisfactorily Ab-Ram went on to the threshing floor. He was accompanied by the inseparable Sur. The month of Nizam was drawing to its close, the wheat harvest was already gathered, the new crop was sown. At this season it was unnecessary to do any ploughing. The seed was scattered among the stubble of the previous crop, and after the sowing cattle were employed to harrow the fields. Ploughing, done with a wooden share, was usual only after the great rains of the winter, when the earth was saturated with water. If the gods were kind and sent rain at the beginning of the summer also, a third harvest of wheat could be gathered before the autumn.

On his way to the threshing floor Ab-Ram turned aside to call on his elder brother, Nahor, whom he had not seen for a long time.

Nahor son of Terah was by no means old, but he suffered from an

unhealthy obesity which kept him from all activity. His face was surrounded with a triple roll of fat, and his head was sunk between his shoulders. Sweating, panting, always hungry, he was continually drinking wine, water, or milk, and wiping the sweat from his head and chest. He rarely spoke, and when he did it was usually in proverbs, which saved him the effort of thinking out his words.

His wife Milcah, Lot's sister, was much younger than he. She had been an energetic girl, but constant attendance on her infirm husband had aged her prematurely. The gods had taken from her several children of tender years. And now, owing to her husband's ailment, she could not hope for any more. And so she had grown irritable and depressed.

Ab-Ram was calling on his brother and sister-in-law in order to take counsel with them in regard to Lot's herdmen. Ab-Ram's men were always complaining to him about them. Lot would apologise, would fall at his uncle's feet; but although his contrition was obviously genuine the situation did not change at all.

'Truly,' Ab-Ram ended his complaints, 'I know not what I should do.'

'Where there is smoke there is fire; where there are reeds there is water,' Nahor remarked, apparently for no reason.

'It is all Edith's fault,' Milcah explained her husband's meaning. 'She stings her slaves like a serpent, but she always begs the herdmen off punishment, and encourages them to do evil. . . .'

'But why does she?' Ab-Ram asked in astonishment.

'She has no liking for you, Ab-Ram son of Terah. Lot is my brother, I am fond of him, for he is good and just. Some demon has put him in subjection to that woman, and has suggested to her designs which she keeps to herself. . . . If I learn anything about them I will warn you, Ab-Ram.'

'Cream from milk, wine from the vine, squabbles from anger,' Nahor delivered his judgment, wiping away the sweat as he spoke. 'Ye gods! How hot it is!'

'Surely you don't think, brother Nahor, that Lot's wife wants squabble between him and me?'

'Thou hast said, brother.'

'Do you think that that is the design Milcah had in mind?'

'I do not think anything. I do know that it is easier to shift iron than that foreign fool. A map cannot catch the wind in a sack, nor can he imagine the thoughts that swarm in a woman's head.'

'What ought I to do, Nahor my brother?'

'I am grateful to God that I have not been made head of the tribe. That is your concern, brother Ab-Ram.'

As Ab-Ram was departing Milcah, who was fond of her brother, asked him to be patient with Lot. 'That red woman is responsible for it all,' she repeated.

'A curse on her mother!' Ab-Ram said, and continued on his way. A spacious threshing floor, trampled hard with bare feet, had been set aside for the threshing. Threshing was usually done with oxen, which were driven backward and forward over the bundles of ears scattered about the floor. This year Lot was proud and delighted to be able to do the threshing with an ingenious Babylonian implement, made specially for the purpose. It consisted of three logs studded with rings, linked one to another, and drawn by two oxen. This implement called a *morag*, was also used in Babylon for the execution of captured enemies. The rolling logs beat out the grain more effectively and quickly than cattle's hooves. Ab-Ram, who was slow to accept innovations, watched the *morag* suspiciously, but Lot was beaming. Dropping the rope passed through the oxen's nostrils, he ran to make his obeisance to his uncle. As Ab-Ram looked at Lot's pleasant, happy face, he thought: 'I shall not let that foreign woman sow enmity between me and this lad of my blood.'

Close to the threshing floor was another, smaller floor, where the grain was winnowed. Slaves threw it high into the air, the wind carried the husks away, and the grain was caught in shallow baskets as it fell. After winnowing, the grain was poured into a long trench, and then covered with earth and reeds to protect it during the rainy season. But today winnowing was not going on, for there was no wind.

Somewhat reluctantly admitting to Lot that the Babylonian invention worked well, Ab-Ram turned back to the encampment. He walked along sunk in thought upon his everyday cares. As he walked something extraordinary, inexplicable occurred to him. The sun was burning hot. The air quivered and sparkled with tiny silver rings. There was utter silence all around him. His kerchief protected his head and neck from the scorching rays; Sur was walking behind him. Suddenly he felt a breath of wind on his sweating forehead, and he realised that he had been carried high into the air. He could see the crowns of palms on the same level as his feet. His cloak streamed out above him like a cupola, like a bellying sail. He felt neither fear nor surprise, as though being lifted into the air were quite

a natural thing. He glanced downward and was startled to see himself as a tiny figure far below him, as though he were observing himself from a tower; behind himself he could see Sur, also greatly reduced in size. Though he knew that to see oneself was an omen of imminent death, he felt no fear at all. The extraordinary phenomenon did not last long. Almost before he knew it the earth began to approach him swiftly, the trees fled upward, and he found himself once more walking along in the heat of the noonday track, with Sur behind him. Only then was he seized with terror. He looked round at the slave. Sur's face showed no sign of astonishment or alarm. Evidently he had no idea of what had happened to his master. . . . Ab-Ram shook inwardly with fear. He knew he had not dreamed it. He remembered every detail. He looked up at a majestic palm tree, and recalled what its crown, loaded with bunches of fruit, looked like from above. That was no dream. Some unknown god, or demon, must have snatched him up and raised him high into the air. He had been carried away like a grassblade whirling in the wind. Why had the unknown power done it? And would he return to carry Ab-Ram off again? Perhaps it was Mar'duk-Bel himself, angry at the Hebrew's unbelief. Ab-Ram had felt no fear at all while suspended in the air, but now he began to tremble like a child.

When he returned to the camp he told Sarai that he had got too hot in the sun and it had affected his head; he lay down in his tent, to reflect on the terrible experience in quietness and peace. The more he thought about it, the more he was afraid. The morning stillness had given place to violent gusts of wind, and Ab-Ram thought it had come to carry him high above the camp. He was reassured when he saw the camels turning away from the wind and the drovers girdling their robes closely so that they should not be blown away. Sarai brought him some refreshment. He forced himself to eat, to avoid her anxious solicitude. In any case she could do nothing to help. He might be carried away again, but, like Sur, she would not know anything about it. Who could help him? Where could he take refuge from this invisible power?

The oncoming evening was sultry, presaging a storm. Ab-Ram told Sarai to sleep in the women's part of the tent, and she went with obvious reluctance. But he wanted to remain alone, even though he was so afraid. His teeth chattered with fear when the flickering wick-lamp called stealthy shadows out from the corners. He was haunted by a feeling that someone was present with him — someone invisible, inflexible, all-pervasive. What

matter that he saw nothing, when he felt that he was seen, that he was being watched in all his members. He tried to defend and save himself. He called on the teraphim for aid; he pleaded fervently for those stone guardians of the race to come to his help. He remembered the spell he had recently bought for his father and began to repeat it slowly, nasally, without pausing for breath. But he had said only the first sentence when he felt the utter uselessness of this resource; it was as though a child should build a dam of twigs against a gathering, roaring flood.

Dawn came, but it brought him no relief. True, the nocturnal apparitions are harder to bear than those of the day, but Ab-Ram could not forget that the demon had snatched him away in the very middle of the day, when Shamash was shining at his most brilliant. When he walked out of the tent Sarai cried out with alarm. His face was yellow and weary, his gaze uncertain. Unable to free himself from her importunate questions and old Noa's offers of curative remedies, he said he would go to the city to make an offering to the gods.

Accordingly, he chose seven of his finest young bulls, without spot or blemish, and ordered the herdmen to keep them separate, and to drive them to the temple when he gave the order. Like all the men of his day, Ab-Ram believed in the power of sacrifice. The rite, as old as man himself, had a triple significance. The sacrifice was recognition that all earthly goods belonged to the gods; it was the price man had to pay to buy the right to enjoy those goods, it was a kind of leasehold rent, rendered in tribute to the true owners. At the same time the sacrifice was a banquet of the god. Those who gave and those who made the sacrifice, who consumed part of the animal laid on the altar, became the god's guests, and also his friends, for to partake of food together forms a bond of friendship. Finally—and this was the most important element of all—in the offering of a living sacrifice a bond of blood was concluded with the god, a family link, a close affinity was formed. It was this conception which had led to the practice of offering one's own blood to the god, in the form of an innocent child.

So the sacrifice was of truly great significance. Only to whom should he make the sacrifice? When there were so many gods and demons, how was he to know which of them had carried him away? If he sent up a petition to the wrong god he would affront the true god. And the affronted god would take vengeance upon him. He could be sure of security if he had the protection of that god who was strongest of all, that

god who was the true lord of heaven and earth. But which was he? And of whom could Ab-Ram ask that question?

Though he was so deeply disturbed, he had not lost his sobriety of mind. He had no liking for the priests, he felt no confidence in them; but he realised that on such a matter he must seek their advice.

The city of Ur seemed to be in unusual ferment. Hundreds of people were working at the city walls, cleaning the walls of the houses, and tidying the streets. Ab-Ram found his father, Terah son of Nahor, quite well again, and as active as he had ever been. The old man flew into a passion when his son asked him the reason for all the hurly-burly in the city.

'You live wild in your tents, and never know what is happening in the world. The Babylonian in his own person is to visit our city shortly.'

'When, my father? And for what purpose?'

'In a month's time; he will accompany the vessel of the goddess, who will make her annual voyage down the Euphrates. Everybody has gone mad. The *Patesi* has turned all the people out of the valley. He intends to build a new building to hold all his tablets of reports, and to complete it before the king arrives. Oh, he knows how to ingratiate himself with the Babylonian! Hammurabi might be angry if he found out that at present the tablets are kept in a cellar.'

'Surely they cannot erect a building in a month?'

'But they will. They are working all day and all night, by the light of torches. I'm working too. I have been commissioned to make two great images. But I lack an assistant. Why did I get rid of Shamir? You must set aside half a score of bulls, for the priests will not accept less. For the first time in his life the son of Sin Muballit will visit Ur without intending to slaughter its inhabitants. We owe him our gratitude.'

Ab-Ram did not tell his father of what had happened to him, but went to the temple. Before he went he bowed low to the teraphim, respectfully yet reproachfully, for they had not been able to help him. Was their power effective only in their immediate vicinity?

The square before the temple was crowded with workmen. Great piles of bricks, laid out in regular positions, were scattered over the ground. Beside a building in course of erection long ribbons of coloured bricks were lying, revealing the design which in due course was to adorn the walls. The design was long and complicated, and the upper surface of each brick exposed only a small section of it. Yet, though so small, it played its

significant part in the general effect of the whole. Woe betide any careless bricklayer who misplaced a brick, so disturbing the harmony of that effect!

The bricks were transported on platforms fitted with rockers. They were rocked violently forward and backward, and with each push they shifted half a foot. While some of the workmen rocked, others supported the platforms at the back with poles, to ensure that they did not slip back. The sweat poured down the men's faces, and their muscles swelled beneath the skin. Women carried water and pieces of refreshing melon among them.

'They may, indeed, finish the building by the next moon,' Ab-Ram thought in astonishment.

There was a similar hubbub of activity in the temple. Hammurabi had sent detailed instructions concerning the organisation of the goddess's festival. The royal scribes had specified the perfumes with which the images of the gods were to be anointed, and the number of measures of oil to be assigned for this purpose. The food which the goddess was to consume during her voyage from Babylon to Ur and back again was also specified precisely. Belting up their robes round their waists in order to allow themselves greater freedom of movement, the priests were working to renew the altar and to repaint the images. Everybody was occupied, everybody was in a hurry; and Ab-Ram was regretfully beginning to think he would have to return empty-handed, when unexpectedly he ran into Sep-Sin.

'Greetings, son of Terah,' said the young priest. 'I assume you have come to help in anointing the gods, and your servants are following in your steps with a herd of bullocks?'

'Greetings, Sep-Sin. Truly I have set aside seven young bulls for sacrifice, but now I have come myself to ask for your counsel. But I am afraid you will have no time for me in all this activity.'

'Speak, I ask thee; what seekest thou?'

They were standing where they had stood a few days before, under the tablets containing the interpretations of dreams. Ab-Ram told the young priest of his adventure the previous day. Sep-Sin listened attentively, and without his usual quizzical expression.

'Follow me!' he said curtly. They went out on to the square. The priest halted by the sun-clock.

'Wait for me in this spot, son of Terah.'

He disappeared into the doorway of the temple tower. While waiting, Ab-Ram stood and watched the workmen, admiring the efficiency with which they pushed the rocking platforms forward. Unexpectedly a bearded man stepped out of the crowd and spoke to him.

'Don't you recognise me, Ab-Ram?'

They exchanged greetings. The man was an old acquaintance of Ab-Ram: Faleh son of Elas, from the city of Uruk, which was higher up the Euphrates.

'We have been rounded up for work,' he explained. 'My brothers and elder sons are cleaning the tombs of the kings, on the farther side of the river; I and my youngest, twins, are working here. Segub, Zammoh! Come here, quickly!'

Two half-naked boys, about ten years old, ran up at their father's shout, and bowed to the ground before his acquaintance. As he looked at them Ab-Ram could not restrain a cry of astonishment, they were so much alike. One seemed to be the reflection of the other: the same height, the same movements, hair, features, expression. . . .

'My eyes cannot distinguish them,' he declared.

'Even my wife, their mother, is mistaken sometimes,' their father said. 'The gods were forgetful, and instead of smashing the mould when they had baked the first, they poured more clay into the same shape.'

Ab-Ram shook his head and smacked his lips; the boys laughed merrily. Sep-Sin came up unnoticed.

'By the perfumed robes of the goddess!' he exclaimed. 'What are these doubles?'

Faleh bowed low and hurried away with his sons, afraid of being accused of dawdling. Ab-Ram fixed his gaze expectantly on the priest's face. But Sep-Sin was still staring after the twins.

'What is the name of those two lads' father?'

'Faleh, son of Elas, from the city of Uruk.'

'Faleh, son of Elas, from the city of Uruk,' Sep-Sin repeated gravely.

'Hearken to what Nergal Sar has commanded me to say to thee,' he added, in a different tone. '“I knew this man would come. I was waiting for him. Let him return to his tent in peace. I will send for him when the Babylonian has departed.”'

'Only when the Babylonian has departed?' Ab-Ram exclaimed, as he remembered his dread experiences of the past night.

'Nergal Sar said: "let him return in peace." So you need have no fear, son of Terah.'

Ab-Ram looked at him suspiciously.

'You said Nergal Sar was waiting for me. Perhaps it was he who sent the demon in order to bring me here?'

'Your thoughts have taken a false road, Ab-Ram. Of that One who caught you away like an eagle carrying off a lamb Nergal Sar speaks with reverence and fear. He is commanded by Him, but he does not command.'

'Then Nergal Sar knows Him?'

'Nergal Sar knows many things that are hidden. As he has said "go in peace," nothing threatens you.'

'May it be so! Blessed be all thy days, Sep-Sin!'

'One moment, son of Terah!' the priest laughed. 'Where are the bullocks you promised?'

'They will be here tomorrow, after sunrise. Did Nergal Sar ask for them?'

'Nergal Sar does not ask for anything. It is I, Sep-Sin, who must remember and trouble myself with such matters. I am the faithful servant of the gods.'

5

The King and His Subjects

IN RELATION TO BABYLON THE STATE OF ASSYRIA, WHICH WAS SITUATED IN the triangle formed by the upper courses of the Euphrates and the Tigris, was a daughter who had grown taller than her mother. For, many ages before, the kings of Babylon had sent warriors northward along the courses of both rivers and had captured the land of the god Ashur, and had founded their own colonies in that land. The Babylonian colony on the upper Tigris was governed by the king's governor. With the passing of time the Babylonian garrisons had intermingled with the local population (who, like the Babylonians, were descended from Shem) and had adopted their customs and beliefs. Babylon was afar off, and the country was wealthy, and rich in daring and enterprising men. The time came when the governor proclaimed himself king, the great king: *ham-melek*. Before long he became even stronger than the *melek melakim*, the king of kings. He commanded valiant and cruel warriors, who recognised no obstacles to their progress. They floated along the river on skins filled with air. These same skins, when filled with water, enabled them to remain almost a score of days in the waterless wilderness. The Assyrian spears never failed, the arrows shot from the Assyrian bows always hit their mark, the Assyrian swords were infallible. They impaled their prisoners. They built pyramids of human heads. They levelled captured cities to the ground and spread a thick layer of salt over the spots where the cities had stood, so that nothing should ever grow there. Broad-shouldered, with luxuriant braided hair arranged in regular notches, snub noses, thick lips, and low foreheads, they thirsted to conquer all the earth. And Babylon first and foremost. The history of the relations between the two states was one of incessant and increasingly ruthless wars.

Despite the Assyrians' hostility to Babylon, in their hour of death the forgotten native land took its revenge. The Assyrian warriors who were

the terror of the world would not rest anywhere after death except in Chaldean earth, in the land of the Lower Euphrates, from which their forefathers had come many centuries before. An Assyrian could live and fight anywhere; but when his soul departed to the mournful place Aral or Sheol, where dust is the food and ash the couch, he could lay down his body only in his true fatherland. On the left bank of the Euphrates, close to the city of Uruk, was a spot where the graves of many generations of Assyrians were arranged in order. The bodies were brought down on rafts with the river current, and the rafts were afterwards hauled up the river again, a task which took months to perform. Of course, this custom applied only to kings, princes, priests, and warriors, to persons outstanding either in possessions or by birth. The common people were committed to the earth wherever they happened to drop; their naked remains were carelessly heaped over with sand, regardless of whether the jackals carried off their bones or the wind swept away all traces of the grave. But not so the dignitaries. Their bodies were laid in wooden coffins, and bitumen which merchants brought from the shores of the Salt Lake was poured over them. Then they waited for the spring season, when after the falling of the waters a whole year's harvest of mortality was carried solemnly down to Chaldea. There was great respect for this ancient custom, and Assyria had never been known to use the funeral boats for a military stratagem, or the Chaldeans to refuse their ancient enemy the right to voyage into the very heart of their land. Death opened the gates to another world, in which earthly hatreds lost their edge.

That year, the twenty-sixth year of the reign of Hammurabi son of Sin-Muballit, and favourite of the gods, it was announced in all the temples of Chaldea that the great festival of the goddess Ishtar's voyage from Babylon to Ur and back would take place at the same time as the solemn burial of the dead Assyrians, which to this end was postponed to the summer season, and that the king himself would take part in the ceremonies. It was the first time he had done so, and it revealed the sagacity of king Hammurabi, who could turn everything to his purpose. For where one cannot conquer, one should take steps to ensure the most satisfactory of relations.

The fleet of vessels which sailed along the Euphrates consisted of several hundred boats. Among them were many of the Babylonians' favourite craft, rafts carried on skins filled with air, and long, narrow boats with high prows, or shallow-draught boats with roofs for protection against

the sun. At the head of the procession came the Assyrian vessels carrying the priests and warriors who formed the retinue of the dead. They were followed by enormous, decorated rafts, on which the coffins were piled high. Round the coffins weepers with rent garments stood, ritually wailing all through the voyage. They wrung their hands, raised their arms, tore their hair, and shrieked as though in a frenzy of despair. The rafts with the coffins, and the boats for the priests and warriors numbered altogether several dozen. When they had all passed, the onlookers saw the Chaldean boats which had accompanied the procession from the moment it crossed the frontier of the state, below the walls of the city of Akkad. These were followed by the magnificent, gilded boat-temples in which the gods travelled with their innumerable servants. Offerings were continually made and incense was burnt before the lifeless features of Marduk-Bel, his mother, Damkina, his wife, Ishtar-Zirbanit, and the other gods, and the smoke coiled over the water. Hammurabi, son of Sin-Muballit, was borne in the largest, loftiest vessel of all. The king, visible from afar, was seated under a baldachin, on a golden throne supported by four winged bulls. In his immobility he was like the gods who had gone before him, and he maintained the same attitude as they. Slaves cooled their lord's head with fans of feathers, but he made no movement whatever. As they offered him food they knelt as before the gods, setting it to his lips. He ate without raising his hands, hardly moving his lips. The people crowding and running along the banks to admire the magnificent spectacle could hardly tell whether he was a living man or a gilded image. Thus the boats sailed along for many hours. At last the towers of the city of Uruk loomed up in the distance, with, a little beyond, the clay mounds bristling with tombs like honeycombs with cells of honey. The weepers burst into redoubled wailing, horns thundered out, trumpets, cymbals and flutes sounded. There was an answering hubbub from the bank. Unnoticed, a little boat with two men in it broke away from the end. Passing the vessels bearing the king and the gods, it raced towards Ur, to announce that the procession was arriving.

All the city poured out on to the bank to welcome their terrible lord, their recent enemy, the merciless suppressor of revolts. The vessels carrying the gods had already arrived, and the heavenly denizens were accommodated in the temples, where they rested after the fatigue of the journey. Hammurabi delayed his arrival. He not only intended to honour the

burial of the Assyrian dead with his presence, but was determined to arrive at Ur in solitary state, not sharing the reception even with the gods. He sat on his lofty throne, unmoving, menacing, inscrutable, enjoying the gaze of thousands of eyes fixed anxiously on him. When the gilded, brilliantly glittering vessel arrived at the bank, a hundred hands seized the line. Slaves laid down a broad wooden bridge provided with handrails. As soon as the boat was firmly moored to the shore the king stiffly descended from the throne and disappeared below deck. Everybody expected him to reappear at once on the bridge. The priests began to chant:

'From the god Enlil thou didst receive authority;
 What more dost thou require?
 From the god Sin thou didst receive primacy;
 What more dost thou require?
 From the god Nin-Urt thou didst receive weapons;
 What more dost thou require?
 The goddess Ishtar gave thee victory;
 What more dost thou require?
 Shamash and Adad watch over thy steps;
 Son of Marduk, what more dost thou require?'

They sang the chant right through, then repeated it from the beginning, but the favourite of the gods remained invisible. Everybody began to feel anxious. What was delaying the monarch? Perhaps he had grown angry again, and would not show his face at all, but would order the city to be burnt down together with its inhabitants, for one knew not what reason.

But now the gates in the vessel's hold, opposite the bridge, were opened wide, the people heard a clatter and violent drumming of hooves, and out of the obscure depths of the vessel emerged an unheard-of, unimaginable apparition, so terrifying that the crowd on the bank fell to the ground with a howl of horror. The favourite of the gods, Hanymurabi son of Sin-Muballit, drove out on to the bridge in a chariot. In a chariot, something no one in all that land had ever seen before. The gilded shields of the wheels revolved like two suns, the forecarriage dazzled with gold plate. But even that was not the sight that most astonished the people; the chariot was drawn by two demons of extraordinary shape. They snorted, reared, breathed out fire from their nostrils, beat their hooves on the floor of the bridge. Their heads were like the heads of locusts, hair like a woman's

flowed from their shoulders, their eyes were huge and flaming, their legs thin and restless, their tails like maidens' braided tresses. The people could not see their wings, but undoubtedly they had wings, for they seemed to rise into the air with every movement they made. Held down with an iron fetter at the muzzles, controlled by reins of gilt leather, yet they strove to break into flight. Hammurabi gripped the reins firmly, holding himself erect, passing unseeing eyes over the petrified crowd. A slave with a fan knelt behind him. For a moment or two the demons pawed the bridge without advancing, then they set off at a gallop for the city. As they approached the people pressed their faces to the ground and groaned with terror. Staging had been erected over the steps leading to the city, and here for a second the chariot halted. Those who were close enough and bold enough to look told their fellows later that the demons revolted and refused to go on. They pawed the earth, reared, pulled to right and left. Then *melek melâkim* was aroused from his immobility and, reaching for a long whip, began to lash them vigorously, until the lash whistled. The chastised demons leaped up, and reared almost erect on their hindlegs. Now everybody felt quite sure that they would unfold their wings. But they dashed off at such a pace that the light chariot flew up and bounced along on one wheel. Pale with fear, the slave clutched convulsively at the sidérail, but the king stood as erect as before. The boards of the staging thundered beneath their hooves. The demons and the chariot vanished under the arch of a gateway shaped like a golden lightning, emerged from its shadow, and tore on at the same headlong speed. When they reached the square the king reined-in the demons, drove round in a semi-circle, and halted before the temple, where the high priest and three rows of *issaku*, *sangu*, and *'kipu* were waiting. The demons' flanks heaved, they were covered with foam like the Euphrates in flood. The slave jumped down and held the demons by the bridle, and the king, with the same cold, fixed expression, passed into the temple to make his obeisance to his father and benefactor, Marduk.

The day of the king's arrival initiated a long succession of banquets and sacrifices. An unbelievable quantity of sheep, turtle doves, cakes, honey, wine, oil, milk, butter, grain, flowers, children, heifers and bullocks was sacrificed to the gods. The temple was turned into a great slaughterhouse. The blood flowed over the pavement, and streamed out even into the courtyard. Hammurabi himself killed nearly a score of bullocks with his

own royal hands. When the priests at last, assured him that the gods had accepted these delectable gifts and their hearts had been mollified, a halt was called to the sacrifices, and *melek melakim* occupied himself with the affairs of the city.

The building hastily erected for the storage of reports had been completed, and the *Patesi* could boast to the king of the order in which the tablets had been arranged. Each year separately. Each day separately. *Hammurabi* did not conceal his satisfaction. He was a devotee of precision, order, and permanent inscriptions. He regarded any question as settled only when it had been committed to a clay tablet or a scroll. Needless to say, he had no suspicion that most of the imposing array of tablets filling the building had been borrowed from the master, *Taribal*, in order to complete the shelves in a satisfactory manner.

From the archives the king went with his suite to the temple tower. At the entrance several young *baru*, *Sep-Sin* among them, fell on their faces before him. *Nergal Sar's* deputy, *Awen-El*, welcomed the king at the threshold. He explained to the monarch that the greyhaired *Sanga-mahhu* had swooned with joy at the arrival of his lord. The ground floor of the tower was devoted to a school of jurisprudence, which had existed for several centuries. Any young lad who applied was accepted in the school, no matter what his origin. After two months' trial the candidate was either rejected or remained permanently. According to his inclination he could train to be a scribe, an accountant, an official of the royal office, an inspector of taxes, or a judge. Entrance to all these professions was based on the ability to read and write, which were no easy accomplishments. The symbols were difficult to master, and vowels existed in speech but not in writing. After mastering the requisite degree of the art of swiftly inscribing the symbols in clay with the *heret*, the students were instructed in the law. The *melek melakim* personally examined the pale-faced, fearful students, and corrected the errors they made as they read the paragraphs.

The first floor was devoted to astrology and astronomy. The observatory itself was situated at the top of the tower, but the tablets containing calculations, diagrams, charts of the heavens, and notes on the eclipses of the moon and sun, were kept on this first floor. These notes went back 1,900 years, and forecast all the changes in the disposition of the heavenly bodies for seven hundred years to come. Separate shelves held rolls of Egyptian papyri treating of the same subjects. The king knew the Egyptian method of writing; from his frequent correspondence with the Egyptian

ruler called Pharaoh. He now asked the priests whether they thought that writing with a reed on strips made from the mash of another reed and stuck together was a better method than inscribing in clay. Awen-El assured him that it was not. True, the Egyptian method was simple, pleasant, and easy. A single ass could carry all the wisdom of the world. But in the event of a fire or a war the gains of centuries would be reduced to a handful of ash or torn rag. Time would destroy those rolls; and only that which need not fear the ravages of time was of value and worthy of consideration.

'Thy words are just,' Hammurabi admitted.

As he conducted the king through the other rooms, Awen-El explained that the Egyptian wisdom had taken all that was fundamental to it from the Chaldeans. It had been enriched by borrowed knowledge, and had not made any further advance. The favour of the gods, especially the great Nabu, the protector of sages, and the kindness of the great and magnificent Mar'duk ensured that Chaldean knowledge made continual progress.

The second floor of the tower was devoted to mathematical sciences, which in Chaldea were as highly developed as the knowledge of the stars. Here were deposited the prototypes of all weights and measures, and measurements of area and height. The third floor contained lists of all the minerals, plants, animals, reptiles, birds, and fishes known at that time, magnificently ordered and committed to tablets.

On the fourth floor medical knowledge was concentrated. By comparison with the other sciences it seemed poor, and was based exclusively on the accumulation of herbs and extensive collections of spells. The Chaldeans considered that the source of all disease was not the body but the soul of man. So it was necessary to track down the infirmity in the patient's mind and heart, and to destroy it; then the body would recover health of itself.

Hammurabi examined everything with growing curiosity. It was true that Babylon possessed rich scientific workshops and collections, as well as stores of documents which went back to the days of the great Flood. But Babylon was primarily the capital, and the priests were courtiers. The political affairs in which the priestly estate participated were not favourable to the development of knowledge. Ur, degraded in political importance, endeavoured to maintain its former primacy at least in the realm of science. As he listened to the explanations provided by the priests

the king inwardly rejoiced that during the recent revolt and ensuing slaughter he had not given orders for the tower to be burnt down, together with all its inhabitants. Of a truth, he would have caused great impoverishment to the state! He was anxious to know what he would see on the further three floors; but before he could set foot on the stairs Nergal Sar appeared at the doorway and bowed with dignity, saying:

'Live for ever, my lord! Now we will go downstairs.'

Melek melakim gave the old man a swift glance. For a moment their eyes crossed. The king yielded. He, who commanded earthly power, submitted to him who had invisible powers at his command. But the king wished to avoid the appearance of defeat.

'Before I go,' he said, 'I desire to look at the prospect to be seen from this floor.'

'Live for ever, our lord! The view is a spacious one.'

The priests stepped aside. Nergal Sar withdrew unnoticed up the stairs. The *Patesi* stood at the king's side. Hammurabi gazed far out over the land.

'Whose are those herds in the distance?' he asked.

'They belong to the tribe of ben Eber, the sons of Eber,' the *Patesi* hurriedly answered. 'This tribe has dwelt many years in the neighbourhood, but in tents.'

'Are they among my subjects?'

'Live for ever, my lord! All the world is subject to you.'

'Then tell me how much tribute they pay into your treasury.'

The *Patesi* turned pale. 'There has been no command to take tribute from them,' he stammered.

'Then why do you call them my subjects? A subject is one who pays taxes.'

He was silent, pressing his thin lips together. Leaning on the stone balustrade, he gazed out over the countryside. Beyond the herds belonging to the Hebrews he saw still green moorland, and the silver of canals; but beyond that belt of green was the wilderness, invisible from where he was standing. Neither man nor camel could cross that wilderness. It could only be encircled. Its breath was murderous. Yet the most fertile lands in the world bordered that ill-boding desert in a crescent moon. In the eastern half of that crescent Babylon and Assyria reigned. Far to the south, beyond the Negeb or Dry Land, was a third potentate, the king of Egypt. So the lordship of the world was shared by the *melek melakim* - the king

of kings – the *ham melek* – the great king – and the Pharaoh – Horus the hawk, Horus the serpent, the Lord of the South and the North Lands. Three potentates reigning all through the ages. Beyond them, on the western side of the crescent, were the states of the Mitanni, or Hittites. The Hittites in turn were surrounded by a swarm of petty states, not infrequently consisting of a single city with clay walls, which constituted the bounds of the state. None the less the ruler was called king and secretly regarded himself as equal to any of the great trinity. Some of these city states were of genuine importance, because of their commerce and shipping. Among these were Sidon, Tyre, and Gebal, also known as Byblos. The great powers regarded friendly commerce with these states as more profitable than conquest.

Besides the inhabitants of these various states, great and small, confined by frontiers, and established by their cities, other peoples also lived in these lands. Like the waves of sand scattered by the wind, they wandered hither and thither – nomad pastoral tribes. Unconstrainable, not recognising any overlordship, moving at the slow pace of grazing cattle, they regularly wandered up and down the fertile crescent, beginning in the south, ending in the south, and once more renewing their northward journey. The track along which they slowly moved, as uncharted almost as the migration of birds, was called *habiru*. No one hitherto had attempted to master and enslave the nomad tribes, yet in the numbers of their men and cattle they represented an enormous wealth.

‘There is a great power there,’ Hammurabi thought. ‘A power unexploited and unowned. That power must become mine, before anyone else takes it in hand and makes it dangerous.’

Aloud he asked:

‘You say that the sons of Eber have encamped here for many years, forsaking their love of wandering?’

‘It is as you say, my lord. They have lived here very long. Their chief has a house in our city, and he has influence with the priests.’

Seeking to divine his overlord’s thoughts, the *Patesi* added:

‘Live for ever, my lord! Is thy servant to number the sons of Eber and take tribute from them?’

Hammurabi knitted his brows. He could not bear to have his decisions anticipated.

‘Have I told you to do so?’ he asked harshly.

The *Patesi* fell back a step.

'Live for ever, my lord! I judged . . .

'Your duty is to listen, not to judge.'

Ab-Ram and Eliezer were out in the fields, separating and dividing the young lambs from the flock, when the priest Sep-Sin arrived at the encampment, making a great impression with his blue robe. Sur ran his fastest to seek his master. Sarai, excited and confused, washed the visitor's feet, seated him on the most comfortable roll of skins, and gave him wine, *dibs*, and *debelah*. The guest ate heartily, praising the delicacies, and admiring Sarai's comely figure. She sat down at the tent entrance to wait on the new arrival. She was burning with curiosity to know what he had come for. Without doubt he had seen the king in that astonishing chariot which had revolving shields and was drawn by monsters. They had heard of these things in the camp, for Obed, Terah's slave, had come more than once for provisions. Apparently the city had been fleeced to the skin by the Babylonian guests. The hucksters were short of milk and bread. Instructed by his previous experience, Ab-Ram had sent his nephew Lot with the provisions, and when he returned he had enough to talk about for two whole days. His grandfather, Terah, son of Nahor, had told him that the winged demons which the king drove were not spirits, but beasts like asses or camels. They were called horses. Stranger still, the kings of the people known as Sumerians who ruled over this land more than a thousand years ago also, it appeared, had used these creatures, riding on them into battle and when hunting. The priests of Ur had preserved pictures of the horses and chariots of those times. The Sumerian chariots were larger than that of the Babylonian, went on four round shields, and had a high front skin to protect the driver against arrows. No one knew how it happened that all memory of these animals had been lost, but it was thought that when the Sumerian kingdom fell its last ruler commanded that they should all be destroyed, to prevent their falling into the hands of the enemy.

Terah also told his grandson about the royal hunts. Hammurapi was especially fond of hunting the *rimu*, the ill-tempered buffalo before which even a lion turned aside. He chased it in his amazing chariot, shot an arrow at it, overtook it if it was wounded, drew level with it, flung his reins and bow to a slave, seized the buffalo by the horns and drove a short, sharp sword into its back behind its shoulder. Such hunting called for no little courage and dexterity. The buffalo could quite well jerk the king out of

his chariot and under its hoofs, and that would be the end of the glory of Babylon. All Hammurabi's character was expressed in these hunts, Terah declared. 'Cold calculation, measurement to a hairsbreadth, and a stroke like lightning.'

Then he told his grandson about the royal hunts after lions, in which trained dogs were used.

At this point Lot's story was interrupted by cries of disbelief. Any animal touched by a dog became as unclean as the dog itself. Animals hunted with dogs could not serve either as food for mortals or as sacrifices to the gods.

Lot was unable to tell them more than his grandfather had told him. But, Sarai thought, if only this priest were prepared to explain these strange things! Alas, a woman may not address a man before he speaks to her.

All these feelings were revealed so distinctly on Sarai's face that the guest amiably opened the conversation. He spoke in a manner peculiar to himself, apparently quite seriously, yet Sarai could not help feeling that he was making fun of her.

'Women,' he assured her, 'should feel especial esteem for our lord, Hammurabi, son of Sin-Muballit. He has shown himself very gracious to them. In the laws which he has deigned to proclaim to the world he has granted them many indulgences previously unknown.'

'Formerly a man had the right to sell his wife in order to meet his debts; now he may still do so, but only for three years.'

'Formerly a man had the right to say to his wife: you are no longer my wife, and to turn her out of the house. Today, by the will of our lord, Hammurabi, if he does so he must pay thirty shekels as a fine.'

'Has there also been any change in the punishment for a woman who acts in like manner?' Sarai asked.

'No, there has not,' the priest admitted. 'It is said in the law: "If a woman says to her husband: thou art no longer my husband, she shall be flung into the river."'

Sarai drooped her head, she was lost in thought. She looked up with sudden resolution:

'Deign to tell thy servant, my lord, what according to the new laws a man should do, having a wife who is barren.'

Sep-Sin gave her a swift glance. He reddened to the whites of his eyes.

'A childless, or barren, woman,' he explained, 'the husband is bound to

put away, since the line must be continued. So says the law. Unless the wife gives her husband a son by another woman . . .'

'O, my lord, thy slave does not understand those words.

'Listen carefully, woman! According to the law, if a barren wife brings to her husband a slave who has not known a man, and says to him: "Go to this slave and quicken within her a son that she may conceive him," when the slave brings forth a son they take the child from her and give it to the wife, and it will be their lawful offspring. . . .

'Pardon thy servant's boldness; what do they do with the slave?'

'Our lord, Ab-Ram, is coming,' old Noa exclaimed. Sep-Sin went out to meet the master. Ab-Ram was hurrying, for he was agitated at the news of the priest's arrival. He surmised that Nergal Sar had sent for him, and he hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry. The strange incident which had put such fear into his heart had not been repeated, and, as several weeks had passed, its effect had been weakened in his memory. The world was once more normal, familiar, as of old. Was it well to arouse the demon by recalling that incident? He did not know.

After exchanging greetings, Sep-Sin went straight to his business:

'Hearken to what Nergal Sar saith through my lips. "Let the son of Terah come on the first day of the new moon. In peace he will hear from me that which his soul desires."'

'Is there anything else I desire?' Ab-Ram thought, stroking his long beard. He thanked the priest warmly, seated him in the shade, and gave him wine to drink.

'Your wife has already given me refreshment, Ab-Ram. A beautiful woman! Beware lest the gods should grow envious of you. . . .'

'The gods do not visit the tents. Deign to explain to me, Sep-Sin, why the Babylonian is departing so soon.'

'The Babylonian is by no means departing. He will remain in the city another month or more. He does not wish to travel until the hot season has passed.'

Ab-Ram's face clouded.

'Nergal Sar said through your lips, Sep-Sin, that he would summon his servant to him after the Babylonian had departed. But now he commands me to come in a few days, when the city will still be filled with hubbub and strange men. Your servant is a simple man accustomed to grazing cattle, not to rubbing shoulders in a royal palace. . . . I am filled with alarm, Sep-Sin.'

'Am I to understand that you will not obey the summons?'

'I shall obey the summons,' Ab-Ram sighed. 'I shall come. Where is your servant to present himself?'

'In the square before the temple.'

'But shall I find you in the crowd?'

The priest laughed aloud, and scratched his left ear.

'By the silver vessel of Nannar-Sin! I would find it easier to persuade the leopard *nimru* to visit the city. . . . As you have no liking for a crowd I will come for you to the house of Terah son of Nahor.'

'Blessed be thy mother, Sep-Sin! Of a truth, I have no liking for the crowd. Forgive your slave, who is a simple shepherd.'

Contrary to his expectations, Ab-Ram found the city empty. Workmen were taking down the plank roadway over the steps. There were no guards at the gate, nor strange men in the streets. The Babylonian vessels had gone from the riverside wharves. In the gateway the hucksters with baskets full of cakes and bread were selling as of old. From their conversations Ab-Ram gathered that the king of Babylon had departed unexpectedly two days before. This news comforted him greatly, but it depressed Sur, who had accompanied his master. The streets looked like rooms left in disorder after revelry lasting all night. Everywhere faded wreaths, the shards of broken pots, bunches of rushes, rubbish, and peel were lying about. From the new building erected for the archives slaves were carrying armfuls of tablets back to Taribal.

Terah son of Nahor greeted his son cheerfully. He was hard at work on an imposing block of wood.

'I have persuaded the priests to let me have one of the beams that supported the roadway,' he explained. 'I don't know yet what I shall carve from it. . . . The Babylonian has departed, may he live for ever! Everybody is delighted. That man was as oppressive as stone. . . .'

'Father, deign to remember what I told you about Obed. . . .'

'Obed is not here. I am alone. All the slaves have been taken to clean the streets. Obed too. The gods have given us a fine day. The Babylonian has gone!'

'But I thought he was to have remained longer?'

'He promised to remain until the first cold nights. When the Patesi and captains heard the news they wept with joy and kissed his feet, thanking him for such condescension. But then, you see, Hammurabi had a dream.

I don't know what kind of dream, except that it was a bad dream. He wished to have it interpreted. The priests said: "King, live for ever! Return as swiftly as possible to Babylon, otherwise thy rule will be threatened." . . . Hammurabi was still thinking it over when one day, as he was going out to hunt, one of those fine animals he drives stumbled in the gateway and all but fell. Maybe some rascal had set a snare in that spot. . . . Everybody exclaimed: "An evil omen!" The priests rent their garments. Hammurabi turned pale with fury, but he departed the same evening. . . . Wise priests! All the city is extolling them. . . . Those Babylonian maws would have stripped us bare. The proverb says: "With the same snare are caught both little birds and lions."

'I extol them too, but I am surprised that Hammurabi was so compliant.'

'The Babylonian is not credulous,' Terah assured him as he plied his chisel. 'He must have suspected that it was a priestly trick. But he was not sure. You understand, son Ab-Ram: he was not sure. None of us can be sure. Maybe the priests are lying, but maybe they are speaking the truth? I judge that for sixty lies they speak the truth once. But how are you to know when? If they spoke the truth, by departing he has saved his state. If they were lying he has not lost much. In this heat the slaves hauling the vessels will be worked to death. . . . That is all.'

He laid the block of wood aside on the floor.

'If only a man could be sure,' he sighed unexpectedly, 'he would live a very different life.'

A Vision of the Past

AS THEY ASCENDED THE TOWER AB-RAM WAS TOO ABSORBED IN HIS thoughts to take much notice of his surroundings, and he listened absently as Sep-Sin explained the ingenious method by which the interior was cooled. 'Water is drawn from the river and raised to a tank at the very summit of the tower by means of wheels set up at the foot and turned by a hundred slaves. The excess water flows from the tank on to the top-most terrace and down the walls, which are pierced with thousands of small openings, no bigger than a wasp's sting,' said Sep-Sin. 'Owing to their porosity the ceilings and walls sweat continually like a man's face in harvest-time, or like a water-pot set in the sun. Great fans are used to cool this dew which cools the air. The surplus water is carried away by clay gutters leading out beyond the walls, and it bears with it all the filth from each floor. . . . But Nergal-Sar would not let the Babylonian go up to the summit.'

'Why not?' Ab-Ram asked distractedly.

'Nergal-Sar does as he desires, and gives his reasons to no one.'

'Then how is it that he has summoned me, your servant, to him?'

'Of a truth, I know not, son of Terah.'

If Ab-Ram had been listening more attentively he would have caught a new note of respect in the young priest's voice. But it did not occur to him that to be invited to a spot to which the king had been denied access was a mark of distinction. For him the all-important thing was that in a moment or two he would see the great *sanga mahhu*, the head of all the *baru*, a priest of whom it was said that his gaze could pierce both space and time, that he knew all the secrets of the earth, and that spirits were obedient to him. If he wished, such a man of might could resolve all Ab-Ram's doubts, could answer the questions that troubled his soul when, during the hours of darkness, he fixed his gaze on the stars. . . . If he wished . . .

Ab-Ram was so absorbed in this thought that when he found himself in a spacious room alone with a grey-haired old man of piercing glance who asked him: 'Dost thou wish to know what demon or god raised thee into the air?' he replied so swiftly that it seemed to be not he but another speaking through his lips:

'Not only that, Nergal-Sar. Thy servant desires to learn from thy wisdom many other things, far more important.'

'Tell me of those things. Then I shall consider whether to answer.'

'Let thine ears, Nergal-Sar, be patient with thy servant's audacity. I would wish to know who created the world, and what was the beginning of things as we know them. Who created me, who created my fathers, and all men, living and dead, who have had their day? Who rules over all the things that live on the earth, that swim in the water, or fly in the air? Who holds up the sun that it should not fall? Who orders the stars? They say it is the gods who do these things. . . . When I was smooth of face I thought so too. . . . But when I grew up I realized that those who say so do not believe their own words. . . . My father, Terah son of Nahor, who served in the temple when young, has told me the priests say that the world was created out of the entrails of the dragon Tiamat, who was overthrown by Marduk. In Nineveh the priests tell this story rather differently, and it seems that in Egypt also it is different.

'Are there then three worlds? Three beginnings? Which is the true story? For my soul thirsts for the Truth. My soul thirsts to know the god who is above all, the god who is the lord of heaven and earth, of all the heaven and all the earth with all the adornments thereof, far more than it thirsts to know the name of the demon who, doubtless for his own amusement, raised me into the air. For that Supreme God will protect me against the demon, even as the royal grace would protect me against an arbitrary king's official. That is what thy servant desires to hear from thee, Nergal-Sar. . . .'

As Ab-Ram ended he reddened, realising that he had spoken long and fiercely, like any woman. A man's speech should be brief and restrained. But the old *baru* did not appear to be scandalised.

'So thou desirest to know the Truth?' he said after a moment. 'And thou art not afraid of the Truth?'

'I am not afraid, Nergal-Sar.'

'Truth is a heavy burden. Art thou sure thou canst bear it?'

'Uncertainty is as oppressive as the load on an ass's back. I long for the Truth.'

'Many have declared that they desired it, but have turned back halfway . . . The last to inquire concerning the Truth was Sep-Sin. . . .'

Sep-Sin. . . . Ab-Ram's mind was disturbed by an unpleasant memory. The distrust it engendered was so keen that he took his courage in both hands, and asked:

'Blessed be thine old age, Nergal-Sar. By what sign can thy servant know that what thou tellest him is the Truth?'

The old man knitted his thick brows. Ab-Ram hurriedly explained:

'My lord, be not angered by thy servant's audacity. It is said in the city that the king of Babylon departed because thou sentest him a dream, and interpreted that dream to mean that he was to depart. . . . If thy wisdom has deceived a great king, how should it be otherwise with an unlearned and simple man like myself? I am afraid thou wilt jest with me.'

'I sent the Babylonian a dream, but the things he saw in his nocturnal vision were true. There have been mutterings against his ministers in Babylon. Only by way of a dream could I use this news to free the city of his presence without betraying those who had informed me. To thee I desire to reveal the truth. I had observed thee before thou camest to me. . . . I was waiting for thee. . . . Tell me what sign thou desirest.'

'My lord, forgive thy servant's rude audacity. I desire no sign. I trust in thy words.'

'Then listen. No one believes in the gods, because where many reign no one reigns. But God is One.'

'O, deign to reveal to me which is that One.'

'He is not to be found in any temple, though all the gods of the world are traces of the memory of Him. . . .'

'Thy words are difficult, Nergal-Sar. Why has He no temple?'

'Because He could not be contained in any temple.'

'Why are all men ignorant of Him?'

'They do not wish to know Him. They suppress that knowledge. For, that which He demands of men is heavier than sand clinging to an old man's feet.'

'With a great thirst do I thirst to know Him.'

'Why?'

'In order to serve Him,' Ab-Ram answered without hesitation; he was astonished by the question. The old man's head sank until his grey beard

touched his knees. The silence lasted a long time. The only sound to be heard was the murmur of the drops of water trickling down the walls.

'What is His name?' Ab-Ram asked ardently.

'He has no name. He can have none. For is He a son of man? Is He an animal, to whom his master says: henceforth thou shalt be called such and such? A name is given by a superior, or by an equal. But He has no superior, and no equal. A name distinguishes the one among the many. But He is one, alone. A name confers the virtue contained in that name. But He is the father of all virtues. Who would be so bold as to name Him, to call on Him familiarly? But even if He gave Himself a name, who would know it? And, knowing, who would dare to utter it? The power contained in that Name would destroy a man.'

'Then by what name can I call Him?' Ab-Ram persisted.

'Call Him Adonai, for He is our Lord. Call Him Elohim, for He is above all other gods; He, the one God, endures for ever. Call Him *The One Who Is*, Yahveh.'

'The One Who Is?'

'He was before the beginning of time. He will endure living and unchanging when time has passed away. . . . He has no beginning or end. Neither begotten nor created, His own existence is life-giving. . . . The worlds were brought forth out of His hand. The worlds will pass away, but if He so desires He will call new worlds into being. . . . His breath directs the courses of the stars. He is Immortal, Omnipotent, Omnipresent. . . . He judges not as man judges after a vision, but with an upright judgement. He penetrates into the very thoughts of man, into his heart and his loins. . . .'

'My lord, thou hast said that He is the father of all virtues. Explain, I pray thee, what I am to understand by that. For the virtue of a camel is its fleetness, that of the ass is strength and endurance, that of a lion grandeur, that of a man courage and truthfulness, that of a woman fertility. To every creature is assigned its virtue. Then how can He possess them all?'

'From Him they have their beginning, Ab-Ram. All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. Whatsoever He has done is beautiful and perfect. Nothing that has come from His hand has miscarried, nothing is evil. . . .'

'My lord, pardon thy servant. Since without Him was not anything made that was made, and all things that He has done are good, whence came evil into the world? For there are men who are very wicked and

very cruel. There are many things which are foul and shameful. Who begot them, Nergal-Sar? Deign to explain to me who begot them?

Nergal-Sar smiled indulgently.

'Too highly dost thou esteem my knowledge, Ab-Ram. To know all surpasses human power. I am far from possessing exact knowledge. Be satisfied with what I have told thee. It must suffice thee that thou hast heard of Him to whom the world is subject.'

'That is too little for me,' Ab-Ram protested. 'What is it to me that thou revealest the source, if I cannot drink of it?'

'For thousands of years man has been consumed by such a thirst. The true end of wisdom is not the adjurations or spells revealed to the people, but knowledge that is the truth. To understand why God created the world, and created it as it is. We have already travelled far, since knowledge acquired not for the exaltation of oneself above others, not to obtain authority or to instil fear, always leads to the Truth, the source from which flows the gift called wisdom. If the creature seeks, he will find traces of the Creator.'

'Wise men though you are, you have halted half-way. Holding the edge of the garment in thy hand, why not try to see the whole form?'

Nergal-Sar shook his head in pity.

'Why not try?' he repeated. 'But what will come of barren desire? God will not come down to man. . . .' His voice shook with deep regret. 'In my grey hairs I have reached a different end, having no other desire in life than to attain to a more perfect knowledge of God. The bound of my days is fast approaching. Now I have to choose from those more enlightened the man to whom I shall entrust what I know, as I was instructed to do many years ago by my predecessor. I seek that man, but I do not see him. I look about me, but I know not whether it is the one who is standing close by me. . . .'

Absorbed in another thought, Ab-Ram did not take any notice of Nergal-Sar's last words.

'Why dost thou wish to entrust what thou knowest only to one man?' he asked. 'Why not to all men?'

'Thy hair is sprinkled with grey, son of Terah, but thy words remain the words of an innocent youth. The man who openly proclaimed the Truth would be killed at once. It is more comfortable for men to believe in gods than in God. It is more pleasant for kings to call themselves gods, than to recognise the Lord in whose presence they are dust. The world

cannot bribe God with anything, for all things are His. He performs only His own Will, and is not subject to the will of others. It is easier for man to live with gods. If man wants anything, he makes a sacrifice to a god and the god answers his request; and with a spell the gods can be compelled to obey!

'My soul is sorrowful, Nergal-Sar. It seems an offence to so great a Lord to speak of Him in secret in the chamber, where no one can hear. . . .'

The old man made no comment, and they were a long time silent. At last Nergal-Sar began again:

'When thou wast standing by the pillar in the temple, waiting for the sacrifices to end, in my soul I heard a voice: "Behold the one thou seekest." I was astonished, but I sent Sep-Sin to thee. Now I see that I did well to hearken to the voice, And I desire to help thee to find that which thou art seeking. Hearken to me. If thou wishest, I can put thy body to sleep and liberate thy spirit that it may soar freely. Many a time have I released my spirit from its body, but I have never succeeded in discovering more than I have now revealed to thee. If thou wishest, thou canst try! As far as thy spirit flies, so much wilt thou come to know. The extent of thy knowledge will be measured by thy desire.'

'Let it be as thou sayest, Nergal-Sar,' Ab-Ram said eagerly.

'Thou art not afraid? Thy body will remain here, in this chamber, as though dead, but thou wilt journey whither thou desires

'Though I were afraid with the fear of a lamb in the presence of a lion, yet I implore thee, my lord, to do as thou hast promised.'

'It would be necessary for thee to remain with me for several days and fast, until the enfeebled body is no longer a barrier to the spirit. . . . Wouldst thou agree to fast?'

'I agree to all thou demandest, if so be that I may come to know that which not I know not.'

'I make no promise that thou wilt know, Nergal-Sar protested. 'I can only give thee wings. It is for thee to decide whether thou shalt fly.'

'Whatever thou sayest, I shall not draw back, my lord.'

'Then return to thy camp and await my summons.'

'Of a truth, Nergal-Sar, I shall not leave this chamber and shall not set food to my lips till thou hast performed thy promise. The desire to know the Lord burns me like a flame.'

The old man smiled, like one convinced and satisfied.

'Then we shall begin to fast from today.'

There are times when men dream strange dreams, dreams that the priestly imagination can neither foresee nor explain. But that which Ab-Ram now experienced, whether dream or reality, was more astonishing and more dread than anything any man in this world has known. Such dreams, such visions, such experiences are not recorded on any tablets in any temple, nor can any *baru* expound them. Ab-Ram himself did not know whether it was a dream, or whether his spirit was in very deed released from his body, to move, a tiny particle, fearful, wandering, in spheres which human eye has never seen, the human ear has never heard, the human mind has never comprehended. He had left time behind with his sleeping body in the chamber of the tower, time continued on the chalice that the priests call a clock; but, as his spirit soared, thousands of earthly years passed like a flash of lightning, though a flash of lightning was more enduring than the span of a man's life. . . . He heard a wind shaking the worlds, a noise as of many waters suddenly falling, the thunder of an avalanche; confusion, chaos and darkness involved all things. Elemental gloom was a part of the chaos, for light had not yet been born. Disorder was law, for order had not yet been commanded. Space, a folded void, in which the least flicker of a gleam was unknown, shuddered like a sea with no ordered succession in its waves. In those dread shades, solitude and darkness would surely last through all eternity.

Suddenly a light clove the gloom. A spirit moved amid the dark waters. A command like thunder cut, divided, thrust, overthrew: the command, 'Let there be! . . .' That which was sleeping was awakened, that which was without movement moved, that which was formless began to take shape. Now darkness was separated from the light, suns were lit, the stars, and the moons. They shuddered and rolled along the paths commanded to them, which they would pursue till the end of time. Now water withdrew from the dry land. The earth heaved like a breast shaken with sobs, mountains spouted fire, and fell into the sea. The sea burst from its bank like fruit from a fructified womb, foamed with revolt, pressed on with its billows, but drew back impotent, subject to law and will. Out of the earthly slime emerged reptiles, birds, and beasts; they moved docilely amid the vivid green, and over them was the azure of heaven, like divine content. God saw that the work of His hands was good, and blessed it.

The sleeper, unconscious of self, trembled and was still with delight, for with the eyes of his spirit he saw the first man. Handsome, radiant, filled with knowledge, gentleness and strength. In the Presence of the

Creator veiled in a Cloud of Glory, to which Ab-Ram dared not raise the eyes of his spirit, Man gazed on God as simply as a child into the face of his father. God's plenipotentiary, made in His image and likeness he walked among the dumb creatures. He gave names to the animals, the plants, the hills and the waters.

How glorious was man! No finer creation than Adam had come from the hands of the Creator. In no other form had the Divine thought been given more perfect expression. He and his companion were free, and immortal. They were subject only to God, they co-operated with Him in the work of creation.

But the ears of the spirit of Ab-Ram were jarred by a discordant jangling which disturbed that harmony. He heard the hiss of a serpent, the rustling scales of a snake. He covered his eyes with his hand: the creature had risen against the Creator, Adam had violated the Divine command.

All things else had submitted. The imperious seas had swollen and raged, but had returned within their banks. The mountain tops had accepted the heights indicated to them, and the abysses had fallen away. Only one creature had defied the Creator. Man, that most noble, blessed, gifted of God's creatures, created in the image of God, desired to be equal with God.

The former peace and harmony were violated, and would not return. The sun turned black like a horsehair sack. The sky trembled like a tree shaken by the wind; the stars fell like ripe figs, and dropped into the sea, leaving trails of light. The world was filled with a new alarm, introduced by the one who had offended God. The stern decree roared like thunder through the valleys. The flaming eyes of the terrible archangel, a barrier of flaming swords, closed the gate to the former paradise. Through the wilderness wandered two human beings, as unhappy and forsaken now as before they had been confident and joyous.

More wretched than the animals, in the sweat of their brow they laboured for their sustenance. They trembled with terror before the divine anger, they trembled with cold, they trembled with fear of the future. When the sun set it was a flaming sword barring access to their former happiness; they stretched out their hands to the gleam, and wept. When the wind rustled the dry reeds they heard the murmur of pleasant streams and they wept again. They were surrounded by hostility, they were without friends. Creation took its vengeance for the sin they had introduced

into the world. The thorns wounded their feet, the sun scorched their heads, the rapacious animals sought to feed on their bodies. Of a truth, if the worlds which the Divine will had set in motion were to hurtle into the abyss, they would work less harm than these two had done. If darkness were again to descend over the earth, extinguishing the lights which God had lit, it would cause less dread than the insolence of these disobedient creatures. If all the monsters and demons of the depths were to appear in all their ugliness the sight would be less repulsive than the abomination which man had wrought.

They wandered together over the empty earth, but their guilt pursued them. It dragged along in their tracks like a rope fastened to a slave's neck. The woman went with heavy belly, and hanging breasts; the man had bowed shoulders. Everlasting exiles; erring stars, lost in age-old darkness; waterless clouds, useless stalks – such were these two who had been created for joyful praise.

And the spirit of Ab-Ram knew that here was the answer which Nergal-Sar had not known: 'Thou hast asked, son of Terah, whence evil came to the earth, and who begot it, since only good comes from God. Now thou knowest; thou hast seen. Thou hast seen the sin which nothing can erase, the guilt that cannot be annulled. It is marked in the infant's brow from birth. It accompanies the old man to his grave. For the sin of the father is passed on to the children.'

A pleasant light played over the dreary wilderness. Raising his afflicted eyes, Ab-Ram saw a Woman. Whence had she come? Who was she? She floated over the earth like the memory of man's lost happiness. As bright as the dawn, as beautiful as an olive tree, as slender as a sycamore growing by the waterside. She bent in compassion over the two exiles.

A crimson haze veiled her from Ab-Ram's sight. Bare feet drummed through the haze, an axe flashed through the air. Brother was killing brother. The tiller of the ground was killing the keeper of sheep. Cain, the jealous, was murdering Abel. The first human corpse was stretched out on the sand. A fair-haired man gazed with dead eyes up to heaven. Beasts sniffed at the body. Sisters lamented. The mother, Eve, howled with sorrow. Cain, the murderer and father of all murderers, fled from his deed. . . .

As Ab-Ram watched in spirit, the seasons passed, ages rolled by, man multiplied like ants in an ant-hill. Now not a slender stream, but a swollen human torrent flowed past with a roar. Whither, none of them knew.

Misery was their lot; death, their end. Passing swiftly, more swiftly than a boat laden with rushes, more swiftly than a weaver cuts his linen, they struggled among themselves, thrust one another down, hated one another. The stink of sin beat in Ab-Ram's nostrils. At times an azure flame of yearning for a different life shot up from the stinking river, at times hands were raised in entreaty to the sky; but a wave once engulfed them and swept them on. . . .

Ab-Ram opened his eyes. Nergal-Sar was standing over him, offering him a cup of wine flavoured with herbs. The old man was exhausted; he kept his feet with difficulty.

'Carrión has to be guarded from the vultures; I had to guard thy body against the demons,' he explained.

The drink revived Ab-Ram. He gazed at the priest with eyes fully conscious of his surroundings.

'Tell me what thou hast seen,' Nergal-Sar asked him; but he received no answer. For, recalling what he had seen, Ab-Ram covered his head with his cloak and burst into weeping. He wept over that lost human happiness, and the offence committed against God. The old man did not dare to break in on his grief; lying down on his couch, he waited patiently.

'Tell me what thou hast seen,' he repeated at last, almost humbly. But still Ab-Ram was unable to satisfy his desire. For he recalled, but he could not find words to tell what he recalled. His mind searched painfully for comparisons, he conveyed what he had seen in pictures, in symbols. Ab-Ram, son of a land where rain is the most blessed of all gifts, pictured that long lost human happiness in a vision of a green, shady paradise, abundantly watered by four streams; he saw the penitential land of exile as a barren wilderness growing thorns and brars. The old *sanga-mahhu* listened closely, piercing beyond the simple symbols, the crude pictures, to the true significance of the vision.

'Of a truth, heaven has stooped down to thee,' he said when Ab-Ram ended. 'What the human mind could not apprehend the Lord has revealed to thee.'

'My Lord, say not things which bring shame on thy servant. But rather explain to me why these things have to be apprehended indirectly, in a vision, when the body is asleep? Why are they mysteries? Why are they not revealed directly to the soul of every man?'

'In a city of blind men a description of the colour in the world would

be treated as falsehood. Man has grown blind because he has forgotten. 'Thou hast heard of the Flood, but knowest thou its cause, Ab-Ram?'

'I have of a truth heard from my fathers that there was a Flood, and that our line is descended from Shem, the son of Noah, the patriarch. It is said that the remains of the ark he built are mouldering on Mount Ararat, which is now known as Mount Barris.'

'The Flood was sent by God as punishment to man for his forgetfulness of the Lord. So terrible a punishment that God Himself took alarm and promised that He would never send another. Barely two thousand years have passed since that time, yet all men have again forgotten the Lord, as a child no longer remembers in the morning the events of the previous evening. The human mind is as fragile as a reed shaken by the wind, as transient as the Valley of Siddim.'

'Will the Lord never pardon? Will the sons of men never regain their lost heritage?'

'Among us seers the word is passed from mouth to mouth that some day a Just One, not born of this world, will come and lay down his life for the sins of humanity, and will ransom all flesh. It is not known whence He will come. Perhaps the clouds will let Him down with the rain? This is a very secret thing, and no seer can explain or understand it. But I pass it on to thee; commit it to thy memory.'

'I saw a Woman crowned with stars,' Ab-Ram recalled, as though that Woman with her compassionate gaze had some connection with the comforting prophecy.

'She is the One who will bruise the serpent's head,' Nergal-Sar whispered reverently. 'That also is something we do not understand, but so it is said.'

'When will all this come to pass?'

'When the times are fulfilled. I myself know no more than that. Ab-Ram, thou hast been permitted to see more than any other mortal, more than I have seen. Never forget how greatly thou hast been privileged.'

'I shall never forget anything of what I have seen, nor any of thy words, Nergal-Sar. But tell me, if thou knowest, what virtue is a delight unto the Lord? How should man behave in order to find favour in His sight?'

'I do not know,' the *sanga-mahhu* admitted, after profound reflection. 'I have often meditated on that question. Yet it seems to me that, since the first man sinned through disobedience, and since his punishment was

for disobedience, surely God requires obedience from the creatures He has created.'

'I swear by water, fire, blood and earth that whatever He demands I shall be obedient to Him!' Ab-Ram exclaimed. His eyes flamed. Suddenly his exaltation died away, and he shrank into himself. 'But how shall I know His will?' he sighed. 'In order to be obedient one must first know the command. Where shall I find Him, that I may say: "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth"?''

'Trouble not thy mind in vain. When He desires, he will announce His will to thee.'

They were both silent. In that encompassing silence they could hear the beating of their own hearts. Nergal-Sar was the first to speak.

'Now I can die,' he said mildly.

'By no means wilt thou die,' Ab-Ram impetuously protested. 'Together we shall instruct the people in the Truth.'

'That I have not been able to do hitherto; I shall not do it now that my body is feeble and my time is long since past. Son of Terah, I offer thee friendship. Exchange thy cloak with mine, that thou mayest be rich and I be thee.'

'Gladly and readily will I, my lord.'

Painfully Nergal-Sar rose to his feet. He took a cloak down from a peg driven into the wall, and handed it to Ab-Ram, who gave him his yellow-grey cloak of camel-hair. Nergal-Sar's cloak was distinguished from that of Ab-Ram only by its colour, for it had been woven of white camel-hair. Such cloaks were rare and valuable. Each attired himself in the other's cloak. Nergal-Sar, who now was hunched and doubled up, must once have been a man of splendid stature, for the folds of white camel-hair enveloped Ab-Ram from head to foot.

'I shall never part with it,' Ab-Ram declared.

'I too shall not part with thine, my son, Ab-Ram. But now go. I am weary. Blessings be on thy head.'

Ab-Ram bowed down to the ground, touching it with his brow, and went out. He, too, walked uncertainly, as though half unconscious. Blinded by the brightness of the day, he rubbed his eyes. Inexplicably warned of his coming, Sep-Sin was waiting for him on the stairs of the next floor. At the sight of the white cloak the young priest made a deep obeisance, saying not a word. Ab-Ram turned and gazed up the stairs. Nergal-Sar was standing at the door of his chamber; he was wrapped in

the brown cloak of a dweller in tents. Ab-Ram pressed his palms to his brow and his breast in token of farewell. The old *baru* repeated the gesture. Ab-Ram descended the steps behind Sep-Sin, who, contrary to his custom, was silent. As Ab-Ram went down from one floor to another the everyday reality thrust itself more and more repellently upon him. Of a truth, he was now returning from an infinitely greater distance than when he had been caught up and restored to the ground. In thought he was still within the chamber at the summit of the tower; yet now he could see his flocks and herds grazing in the valley, and even distinguish his own tents, and those of Nahor. Though in his soul he had not desired to part from that other, barely discerned, revealed world, he could not but feel anxious at the thought of what might have happened in the camp during the days of his absence. Perhaps there had been further conflicts among the herdmen? Had Lot, son of Haran shown himself strong enough to take his wife in hand? Had Elfezer given due attention to the calving cow? The cares of the everyday took more and more insistent possession of his mind.

7

And it Came to Pass .

SARIA CLAPPED HER HANDS WITH DELIGHT WHEN SHE SAW HER HUSBAND in the the white cloak. He seemed very handsome and magnificent. She thought the dignity of his attire was responsible for the change in his behaviour which she felt with her woman's instinct, though she would have been unable to describe it. Ab-Ram was always distinguished by his gravity, composure, and kindness; but now he tended to be absentminded, a quality she had not known in him before. Lost in thought, gazing with unseeing eyes, he seemed to attach no importance whatever to the news she poured into his ear. Eliezer also noticed this absentmindedness of his master, when he reported on the events of the past few days.

Evening came on, filled with the chatter of birds, the bellowing of cattle and the sounds of the drovers' horns. The heat, which had been as heavy as lead, yielded place to a delightful cool. Little by little the evening noises died away, were absorbed into the silence. The great golden moon arose in the firmament, extinguishing the stars. The jackals in the undergrowth began their evening complaints, and the camp dogs answered them with baying. The evening meal was eaten, the women washed the utensils. Old Noa carefully covered the hot ashes. As was his custom, Ab-Ram seated himself before his tent, away from the rest of his family. The open scroll of heaven hung above him; the stars, pale in the moonlight, inscribed their mysteries in that scroll, and arranged themselves in signs. Gazing at them, Ab-Ram lived again through the vision, revived the pictures he had seen, and still did not know whether it had been in a dream or in reality, in spirit or in the body. With the utmost effort he attempted to fix all the pictures in his memory and arrange them as a whole. In consequence they shrank and contracted; none the less, they remained sufficiently magnificent to fill his soul once more with adoration, yearning, and anxiety. Wrapping himself closely in the old *baru's*

cloak—not because he was cold, but to draw closer to the teacher—he recalled many things which remained incomprehensible, unintelligible, and complex. He was not disheartened at this, for how should he, an unlearned man, expect to understand? But he decided to ask Nergal-Sar earnestly to explain certain things to him. At the same time he was amazed that the *sanga-mahhu*, who knew the Lord Most High, should continue to be a priest to Marduk. 'Why, knowing the truth of the world, had he lived all his life in falsehood?

Evidently he was lacking in strength. The other priests would have killed him at once, and he was old. He had no other shelter than the tower. Truly, Ab-Ram decided, I will bring him here, I will honour him as a father. Together we shall declare the glory of the true Lord. I shall return at once to the city, and seek out Sep-Sin in the temple. I shall ask him to say to Nergal: 'By the friendship of which your cloak is the proof, deign to see me, Ab-Ram, yet again.' When I am conducted to him I shall question him about all those things I now do not understand, and I shall fall at his feet, and entreat him to dwell here with me.'

The time was nearer dawn than midnight when, glad at the decision he had taken, he went into the tent. Sarai was asleep, wearied with fruitless waiting for her husband. The little lamp was sputtering quietly. Ab-Ram fell asleep at once, and slept deeply and long. He slept off all his weariness. He was awakened by someone touching him. The sun was high, the flies were buzzing. Sarai was bustling about outside the tent; it was Sep-Sin who was bending over him.

Ab-Ram rubbed his eyes, perfectly sure he was dreaming; but the priest did not vanish.

'Awaken, son of Terah, and listen to the news I have brought. Very ill news. Nergal-Sar, the *sanga-mahhu*, died during the night, summoned by the gods. . . .'

'Nergal-Sar is dead?' Ab-Ram exclaimed in horror, starting to his feet.

'He did not summon anyone to him yesterday,' Sep-Sin said. 'We *baru* are conscious of death when it is near. We heard the flutter of its wings above the tower. When the *sanga-mahhu* did not send for anyone, Awen-El and I went up to his chamber. Nergal was resting on a couch, wrapped in your brown cloak, Ab-Ram. He must have departed for the region of the shades long before our arrival, for his body was cold and stiff. Awen-El exclaimed: "Where is the *sanga-mahhu's* white cloak?" I answering, said:

"Am I to know where his white cloak is?" I slipped away from the tower and hurried to you. . . .

'My light has gone out, my joy has departed, accursed be all my days,' Ab-Ram lamented; he was crushed by the news.

'Son of Terah, what will you do with the cloak?' Sep-Sin anxiously asked.

'With the cloak? O, with the cloak! Why did you not tell Awen-El the truth, Sep-Sin?'

'I did not tell him the truth because the white cloak which *sanga-mahhu* gave you - I know he gave it to you, I saw him standing at the threshold, wrapped in your shepherd's cloak - that cloak is of great importance. We believe it contains part of the power that Nergal-Sar possessed. Awen-El will be the *sanga-mahhu's* successor. He wishes to have the cloak. Though they weave him a new one, it will not be the same. . . . Awen-El is jealous. Do not provoke him.'

'I am not to be disturbed by Awen-El's anger and I shall not hand back the cloak, which I promised to keep always. My friend did not part from my cloak, though it stinks with cattle and the desert. He departed to *sheol* in it. I shall scatter ashes on my head, I shall put on sackcloth, I shall bow my head like a sickle and shall mourn my teacher. . . .'

The hot season was drawing to its close. The date harvest, which was plentiful that year, had been gathered. In the vineyards could be heard the grating of the heavy wooden presses which squeezed the juice out of the grapes. The second crop of wheat had been harvested, threshed, and stored in trenches. Ab-Ram supervised the work as usual, visited his numerous herds and flocks, settled the differences among the herdmen, quelled the women's squabbles. In all things he was the true father of the tribe, the chief, the judge. But he did not regain his inward peace. 'Are you sure you can bear the burden of truth?' Nergal-Sar, his master who had departed almost as soon as he had come into his life, had asked him. With arrogant certainty Ab-Ram had replied that he could. None the less, he had done nothing so far for the Truth, and he had lost all hope of being able to do anything in the future. Only now was he coming to understand Nergal-Sar's impotence. Against the daring man who denounced the universal faith all the mighty of this world would rise. Both the kings and the priests. Two powers, each functioning efficiently, and holding all the life of the country in their hands. Even the old sage, whom all respected,

had not convinced them; how much less could he, Ab-Ram, a Hebrew, known to no one outside his tribe? Then what was he to do? He would go on living as he had lived, suppressing the secret within himself; and, as he had no son, he would not find anyone to whom he could pass on that secret before he died, as Nergal-Sar had passed it on to him.

He was poisoned with these bitter thoughts; he despised himself. Until one day, as he was passing by the trenches freshly filled with their wealth of grain, suddenly a thought flashed like a command through his head, as simply as the flash of a sword. 'Get thee hence! Depart! Become again a wandering tribe as your fathers and forefathers were. Go out far into the wilderness, and on free soil freely proclaim the glory of the Lord Most High. Fold your tents, leave behind all that cannot be loaded on to the back of an ass or a camel, and depart.'

This idea took such strong hold of his mind that he could not rest. He would gladly have set off at once, even before the rainy season began. But it did not depend on him; it depended on the real head of the tribe, on Terah son of Nahor. And here Ab-Ram came up against insuperable opposition.

Though he mentioned his intention humbly and gently to his father, the old man was carried away by anger.

'You want to see your father dead, you shameless child!' he shouted. 'You want to shorten my days, you degenerate! Am I in my old age to be shaken about on a camel, to sleep in a tent with the scorpions and spiders, to listen to the bellowing of cattle, to lick up the dust of the desert, to get wet through in the rainy season? Ye gods, behold how my son desires to injure me! He has eaten some evil herb, it has turned his brain.'

'Then, father, free me from the headship of the tribe. Permit me to go alone with my wife Sarai and a few servants. Hold not my spirit in bonds. If you desire to retain the servants, then release only me and my wife. . . .'

'Silence! Go you never shall! With servants or without, I will not let you go, you wicked, ungrateful son. Madman! What has taken possession of you? Has a demon entered into your brain? Like Nabilow, who fled naked through the streets when a demon entered his head through his nostrils? Where will you find pasturage equal to this? Though your bulls numbered a thousand you would never lack for pasturage. . . . Tell me, why do you want to go?'

Ab-Ram looked about him to make sure no slave was listening, and confessed:

'I must depart hence, my father, because I do not believe in the gods.'

'But what difference does that make?' the old man asked in amazement. 'I too do not believe in Marduk. You know quite well. . . .'

'I do not believe either in Marduk or in Nannar-Sin, or in any of the gods and goddesses whom the priests glorify. I believe in the one God, the Lord of heaven and earth, who created all the world.'

'Hm! So He demands that you should sacrifice your old father's bones, which you wish to scatter over the desert?'

'Father, deign to sneer not at your son. My heart is filled with love and respect for you. My God does not demand such a sacrifice. I want to depart because here I cannot glorify Him.'

'What does your god look like?' Terah asked inquisitively. 'Where did you get him from? What is his name? I would like to see him. Where have you got him? In the camp?'

Ab-Ram sighed. To the best of his ability he tried to convince his father that the True God could not be seen nor His name known, nor, even less, could He be possessed. But he only provoked a new outburst of anger.

'I knew at once that you've gone mad,' Terah cried. 'You are talking nonsense. You never shall go. I command you to go to Taribal and buy a spell against the demon disturbing your brain. Come and see me again when you are well. Remember that those who afflict their parents do not go to *sheol*.'

'May I never be an affliction to you, my father. . . .'

'Buy a spell. Make an offering in the temple. You must make an offering. Seven bulls or heifers. . . . The priests are already hinting. . . . The last time I saw Awen-El he said he looked out of the tower and saw our herds as numerous as the stars in heaven. . . . I know what such words mean, I know!'

'The herds belong to you, father. I will do as you command. Tomorrow Yaffiel and Hiel will drive the bulls here.'

'But you will not come with them yourself?'

'Have mercy on your son, father, and do not command him to come.'

Ab-Ram's voice quivered with sincere unhappiness, and Terah felt sorry for him. The boy was sick, seriously sick, that was obvious. The old man repeated his advice to buy a tablet with a suitable spell quickly. They parted. As Ab-Ram went out he bowed low before the teraphim. He did not regard these stone figures as gods, and so respect for them would be no disparagement to the Lord Most High; they were members of the family, the personification of the line. He walked through the

s, and the western wind, the longed-for harbinger of rain, tugged at the edges of his cloak. He was deeply troubled. In his head sounded the incessant command: 'Get thee hence! Get thee hence! Go out from thy father's house. Go out from thy land!' And Ab-Ram thought anxiously that this was of a truth, the Lord's command. How was he to obey it? The crows pecked out the eyes of the child who did not honour his parents. Not even *sheol*, that mournful place where dust was the food and ash the couch, would accept wicked sons, as Terah had justly reminded him.

The first autumn rain, the *Yoreh*, fell in the second half of the month Marcheshvan, and proved to be abundant. Sitting in their closely-fastened tents, the Hebrews listened gladly to the drumming of the water on the tent-skins, for it augured a bountiful harvest in the coming year. The rains saturated the ashy earth, from which all trace of green had gone; hard as rock, it had cracked and split into great crevices. The dried-up streams were renewed, the level of the Euphrates rose, so that its water flowed into the canals, which had been dry for a couple of months. After the rainy season a brief winter set in. *Safon*, the north wind blowing from mountains crowned with snow, from the mountains in which both the Tigris and the Euphrates had their source, blew along the valley with growing strength. But the cold of the night departed swiftly, and the cattle, frozen at dawn, by noonday were seeking shade from the sun. The people used the winter period for ploughing and the first sowing of the fields.

To Ab-Ram the winter brought no change, nor even the hope of a change. He was remaining in the one spot, like a prisoner shackled in fetters, a wanderer halted half-way to his goal, a hunter compelled to abandon the track he had come upon, a thirsty man denied access to water. When he recalled that ere long a year would have passed since Sep-Sin's announcement that Nergal-Sar had noticed him standing by the pillar, he felt offended with the Lord for choosing such an unworthy instrument as the old priest's confidant and witness. Why had He done so? He flew the minds and hearts of men. He knew that a simple shepherd had no authority whatever outside his tribe. Why had He not revealed Himself to a king or a prince? To a mighty warrior? Why had he not lifted Hammurabi son of Sin-Mutallit into the air and filled him with terror, so that he would glorify the true Lord instead of enlarging the praise of Marduk, in whom no one believed? Why? What was He? Was He playing with him?

The spring downpours arrived, vehement, tempestuous, blessed, transforming the earth into a humid green paradise. Gazing by night at the lightnings which lit up the sky from rim to rim, Ab-Ram trembled, for he seemed to be hearing the echo of the fiery missiles he had seen in his vision. He turned pale as he listened to the thunder, faint though it was by comparison with the recollected roar of the elemental thunders. Around him his kinsmen rejoiced at the promise of the harvest, and thanked the gods because the rains were copious. Eliezer hinted at the necessity to make a thank offering. Ab-Ram pretended not to hear. In the tents the auguries of the coming harvest and the length of time the rains would last were read. Everything around them could be used as an augury: the direction of slanting rain, the bubbles on the surface of water, a rainbow, the shape and colour of the clouds, the wind, smoke, the flight of birds; the behaviour of reptiles and serpents, the cry of an ass, the roar of a lion, the sight of a snake, an echo repeating a voice. They told one another the results of the auguries, and compared them gladly or anxiously. Ab-Ram listened with indifference, absentmindedly. In the event of famine he had sufficient in store to feed his tribe for at least a couple of years to come; and the one thing he desired – freedom – was without indication from the omens, though in all else they were generally favourable. But that which the others regarded as favourable – a satiated, carefree stay in this one spot – meant only further torture to him. With the same inattention as he listened to the interpretation of the auguries he listened to Eliezer's and Yahiel's complaints about Lot's insolent herdsmen, and accepted the fact that Lot always avoided him, and that Lot's wife Edith was unchanged in her womanly frailty. Even the ugly gossip which Sarai repeated to him about the drover Hiel, a widower, who was said to be rather too fond of his daughter Azubah, did not shake him out of his meditation. As head and judge of the tribe he was in duty bound to call a meeting of the elders to consider this gossip, and, if the accused were found guilty, to punish them in accordance with the law. But it seemed to him that, until he had solved his own most important problem, he should take no steps in that matter.

'What is the matter with our Lord?' Eliezer asked anxiously.

Sarai nodded her head with a mysterious air, unwilling to admit that she knew no more than the servant. But Noa let her tongue wag. In her view the master was bewitched, and had been for a long time now. You had only to look at him to see that he was not the same man.

Ab-Ram's one comfort during all this time was in remembering his vision in the Temple Tower. Many hundreds of times he attempted to recall it, to order it and see it as a whole. He persistently repeated certain words which gradually formed into a rhythmic verse. As often as the clouds dispersed at sunset and the night fell calm and peaceful, Ab-Ram sat on the damp ground outside his tent, alone with his thoughts. When everything all around was cast into a deep sleep, a song sprang to the solitary sitter's lips:

'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.'

At the thought of that deep, with its yawning abyss, he shivered. Hurriedly he went on:

'And there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness.'

Oh, words were inadequate to convey that struggle of the elements and the sword of the command dividing them!

'Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear; and it was so.'

'Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and the fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven. . . . And it was so.'

Ab-Ram swayed measuredly back and forth in time with the words, as is the habit of singers. With gladness in his heart he felt that now he would lose nothing of the treasure entrusted to him. Though the vision might fade, erased by the years, he would be able to repeat those words without fear of changing them. For, despite all the priests said, neither stone, nor clay, but the human memory, was the most enduring material of all.

'So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him . . . male and female created He them. . . . And God blessed them, and God said unto them. . . .'

The slow, solemn voice disturbed Sarai. She started up and looked through the chink in the flap to see whom Ab-Ram was talking with. What sort of guest had come to visit him in the night? At the sight of her husband sitting on the ground with his face turned to the stars, repeating words that had no meaning whatever to her, Sarai was terribly afraid. Now she was sure that Ab-Ram was conversing with a demon. Un-

doubtedly it was the one who had bewitched him, as Noa had justly said. That was why he always commanded her, his wife, to sleep on the women's side these days; that was why he behaved as though he did not hear what she was saying to him. O, ye gods! How to remedy this misfortune?

Trembling, she returned to her couch, and did not fall asleep till morning.

The fast, drenching downpour passed. The heavy clouds began toeling to the summit of the tower. In the upper course of the river the slanting streams of rain charged along like a sweeping curtain concealing part of the land from the sight of the gods. The slave Obed came to Ab-Ram with a command from Terah son of Nahor.

The slave Obed had not been sold after all, despite Ab-Ram's insistence. Old Terah declared that he did not possess the health and strength to instruct a new slave; besides, the priests corrupted every new slave you bought; and in any case, even if Obed the son of a jackal had a hundred eyes and seven ears on every side of his head, he would neither see nor hear anything worth reporting.

Obed's round head glistened with the rain as he humbly bowed low in an obeisance.

'Greetings, Ab-Ram son of Terah. My lord Terah, son of Nahor, summons you to stand before his face.'

'Is my father ill?' Ab-Ram anxiously asked.

'The gods watch over my lord's health. Terah son of Nahor is well.

'I will go at once,' Ab-Ram decided, and reached for his cloak. Glancing at the slave, he added:

'Wait here for me till I return.'

Obed was astonished, and a flush spread over his face. He opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it and bowed again, holding his peace.

Telling Sarai he was going to the city, waving off Sur, who prepared to accompany his master, Ab-Ram set off as swiftly as the sature'd clay clinging to his feet would allow. He pulled his sandals out of the soil with difficulty. Meanwhile a grey sheet of rain approached as though blending with the river, and the first drops of a fresh downpour fell on his head and shoulders. He turned his face up to the rain with enjoyment - this son of the soil to whom rain was the arbiter of life or death.

Terah was waiting for his son; he was well, but evidently was dejected. Ab-Ram had never seen his father so depressed before.

'The gods have turned their faces from us as in the days of the Flood,' he said to his son. 'Open your ears, and listen to what the *Patesi* has told me: the Babylonian has ordered that all the people are to be numbered and a poll-tax collected. . .'

'All the people in the city?' Ab-Ram surmised.

'Listen without interrupting! The people of the city were numbered long since. What are they to me? By the breasts of the goddess! The Babylonian wishes to bring us, the free Hebrews, into subjection. He wishes to number us, our herds, our flocks, our servants, our slaves . . .'

'We are a free tribe,' Ab-Ram replied, and his face darkened. 'The earth belongs to no one; we do not live in the city, we water our cattle in the river, not in the canal. The Babylonian has no claim on us. . .'

'Who will command him to respect the law? Before what judgment will you bring him? Who will pronounce that the earth is no one's, when Hammurabi son of Muballit says it belongs to him?' o

Ab-Ram was silent. The old man went on with growing anger:

'First they will number us. . . "Only for the sake of order," the *Patesi* says. The Babylonian wishes to know how many cattle there are grazing beside the Euphrates. Then he will take a tithe of our livestock. Nothing more! O, I know! The lioness is followed by the lion, the jackal by the hyena, and the twilight by night. . . After the tithe they will take the firstborn; then they will summon our people to labour, and anyone who refuses will have a string passed through his nose and be driven like a bullock in a yoke. . . Finally they may fetter us in shackles. . .'

'Whatever happens we will not allow that!' his son curtly declared.

'How will you prevent it? Will you make war? Will you begin by fighting the Babylonian? The sheep has risen against the lion! Where are your swords? Where are your shields? A few old bows which the striplings use for pleasure, and half three score of rusty spears. So much for the weapons in the camp!'

He looked at the stone teraphim and fell on his knees, beating his forehead on the pavement before them. o

'Protectors of our race!' he cried desperately. 'Guardians of our ancestors! Help us! Now then!' he shouted at his son. 'You kneel down too! You ask with me. Only they can help us.'

Accustomed to obeying his father, Ab-Ram knelt down and bent his

head until his brow touched the pavement. But he did not pray, and did not think of the teraphim. He was dazzled by a sudden joy, he caught his breath. Behold, the Lord had sent him deliverance! Now he could depart hence.

He assisted his father to rise, seated him on a bench, and said:

'I swear by the living God that I will never submit to being anyone's subject. I would rather the tribe perished than went into slavery.'

'Your words are just. I would not wish it to be said that in the days of Terah son of Nahor the Hebrews were made slaves. . . .

'We shall not be slaves, my father. We shall depart hence. You remember that I asked you in the autumn. . . . Today you will not forbid me. . . .

Terah shrugged his shoulders reluctantly.

'That nonsense again? Flee from the Babylonian? What are you dreaming of? Cattle move slowly, and he has swift camels. . . . He would overtake us at the first halting-place.'

'Believe me, my father! Your ripe wisdom says we shall not succeed in getting away. My audacity dares to declare that we shall trick the Babylonian and pass beyond his frontiers without hindrance. . . .

'Impossible!' Terah sighed. 'Nor do I think I could endure wandering in the wilderness.'

'Would it be any easier for you to endure slavery, my father?'

They were silent a long time. Terah panted irritably.

'We will cast lots,' he announced at last. 'We will take counsel of the gods.'

From a shelf Ab-Ram took down the *purim*: smooth river-pebbles, polished with much use, for it was the universal custom to resort to the *purim* at moments of great uncertainty. Family problems and questions of inheritance were always decided with their aid.

'If I draw the white stone I will accept your plan,' Terah said.

Ab-Ram imperceptibly raised his eyebrows. Custom decreed otherwise: it was he who should draw lots. But let it be as his father had said.

He gathered together the edge of his cloak and dropped the stone into it, shaking them several times. Fixing his gaze on his son's eyes, old Terah rummaged for some time in the folds of the cloth. A cunning smile flickered at the corners of his mouth. At last he raised his hand, and stared with unconcealed amazement at the white stone held in his fingers.

'It has fallen to you,' he admitted in a disappointed tone.

'Perhaps you would like to repeat the draw, father?'

'No, I would not!' the old man answered angrily. 'I would not!'

'Then we will go out from Ur!' Ab-Ram rose and paced the chamber with his old resolute stride. Inwardly he was jubilant. That of which he had dreamed had come to pass. They would depart from the city. They would become a free people. As free people they would begin to glorify the True God.

Terah followed his son with his eyes. He was depressed by the result of the draw. He knew his stones so well. Always, hitherto, he had succeeded in distinguishing the white stone by certain almost imperceptible ridges in its surface. And yet, he had erred. . . . Was it possible that Ab-Ram's unknown god had intervened in this matter?

Ab-Ram said:

'We do not possess weapons, so we must use the cunning of the serpent. Father, deign to act as your son requests. When you see the *Patesi*, tell him he should delay with the numbering until the return of the herdmen who have gone with a portion of the cattle up the river; otherwise he will have a twofold labour.'

'Have you divided the herds? I did not know.'

'Father, great cunning is needed in order to deceive the Babylonian. I have not yet divided the herds, but I can do so. We must be like serpents. . . . If the *Patesi* asks, "when will the herdmen return?" you will reply: "When the rains cease and the waters flow into the river. Earlier they will not return. Or do you desire that I should order them to return earlier, and let the young heifers be drowned?"'

'I will speak as you say,' Terah said, as he rose after thinking for a moment. 'But will it be of any avail?'

'We shall gain time, my father. We shall prepare for the departure.'

'They will overtake us and we shall perish. They will drive us as slaves to Babylon.'

'Banish your fears, father. Nothing evil will happen to us.'

'Has your god assured you of that?'

'He has!' Ab-Ram exclaimed vigorously. 'I know that the Lord will watch over us.'

'Then will I do what he commands me through you,' Terah yielded, feeling reassured. He could not get the incident with the white stone out of his head.

A Hand Stretched Out in the Darkness

IN THE HEBREW CAMP THERE WAS THE HUBBUB AND CONFUSION OF A beehive before the bees swarm. Everybody went about in a state of feverish excitement. Thirty years had passed since the tribe had first settled outside the city of Ur, to sow wheat and barley, to plant vineyards and date palms which were already yielding a bountiful harvest; and now it was proposed to abandon all these blessings and to start wandering. Where to? What for?

Only Nahor, Lot, and, among the servants, Eliezer, knew the reason for the coming departure. And they had sworn by fire and water, by the earth and the air, that they would not reveal that reason prematurely to anyone. Afraid lest information concerning the preparations for their journey should reach the city, Ab-Ram forbade his kinsmen to leave the camp without his knowledge, and set guards on the roads, instructing them to detain any stranger. For it was possible that the *Patesi* would send spies to discover what the Hebrews were doing. It was true that Terah, obedient to his son's counsel, had arranged with the *Patesi* that the numbering of the tribe was to take place only after the spring sowing season; but an excess of caution could do no harm.

The older drovers and shepherds remembered the days preceding their present settled existence, days of wandering which continued uninterruptedly, and were their own occupation and aim. In their view it was a fine life. The sky above you, the earth under your feet; you drove the cattle along, shouting 'Hai! Hai!' You never laboured at the plough, you never set yoke on the oxen, you never wore yourself out in the heat, harvesting the wheat, or lashing the ladanum, or threshing the bearded barley. The cattle looked after themselves as they grazed, and you walked along quietly and sang. Every day you lit your fire in a new spot. In the morning you collected the embers into a pot and went on, on . . . The

stars guided you on your way when, in the hot season, you journeyed by night and slept by day. Of an early morning the sun, the radiant face of Shamash, ran before you like a giant striding across the sky, and you followed him, you followed him. . . . Sometimes, when you came to a good pasturage you would pitch your camp in the one spot for a week, or two, or three. . . . Then the women took advantage of the rest to repair the worn clothing, while the men lay in the shade and did nothing.

But they also recalled the more unpleasant aspects of the nomad life. The cold nights in the mountains, where your teeth chattered even when you huddled over the fire, and the mothers lay over the children to warm them; and there were terrible storms, unknown to valley-dwellers. Rocks came hurtling down, and thunder roared through the ravines. Then terror took possession of man and beast. In the south you might be caught by a desert whirlwind which overwhelmed the tents with sand, so that no trace of them was left; and darkness covered the earth even in the daytime. They recalled how the hungry lions came right up to the encampment, endeavouring to jump over the barrier of thorns. At such a time there was nothing else to be done but drive out several head of cattle to be devoured by them. The cattle refused to go out and turned to gore you; those driven out struggled to get back, and broke down the barrier. Terror, terror . . . It was best to clear out of such a spot as quickly as possible, even though the pasturage was good; for once the lions were aroused they never gave you any peace.

They recalled the great poisonous spiders, the huge scorpions, the serpents. . . . The hordes of desert robbers, bands formed by escaped slaves, cunning and cruel. You had to be always ready for defence. It was good that Ab-Ram son of Terah had bought spears and swords.

'A dried-up well is worse than a horde of robbers,' another broke in. 'Sometimes the gods are angry and hide the waters, but what has angered them you cannot tell. . . .'

The youngsters listened to all this gossip with unconcealed consternation. They could not understand why anyone should of his own choice abandon a life of plenty, trenches filled with grain, numerous barrels of wine, a good river with ample water, to go out into the wilderness where lions and demons or bands of robbers lurked.

The loudest and most energetic curses of all were uttered by the women. They vociferated so loud, it was amazing, that the noise did not reach the city. All day they ran as though mad from neighbour to neighbour,

questioning each other, counselling, upbraiding. One woman had collected a whole heap of dried dung for fuel, and was in despair because she would have to leave it behind. Very necessarily had she laboured over its collection! Another had prepared wool for spinning, and had flax steeping in a tub. They were all in a great hurry, but there was always time for one to halt another, a bundle of clothing in her hands, and gossip so long that the shadows lying about their feet began to lengthen.

The children, jostled and driven from the tents to have them out of the way, filled the air with squealing and laughter. They hung about the drovers examining the asses' hooves, they peeped into all the corners. Clouds, the last guards of the passing rainy season, floated over the sky and unexpectedly sprinkled a brief, sudden rain once or twice a day.

The depression which had burdened Ab-Ram had vanished without trace. Amid the general tumult he alone was calm, and even merry. He had grown younger; indefatigable, omnipresent, he himself watched over everything, remembered everything. Though he ran all day, Sur could not keep pace with his master's orders. Ab-Ram laughed at the women's lamentations; and when, streaming with tears, Sarai implored him to take the bread-oven with them, he asked whether she wanted him to load the city gates also on to the animals, because of the cool which lurked in their shade.

'Let the women forget the ovens and their stores of dried dung,' he said. 'Henceforth they will prepare the meal on a simple camp fire as their fathers and forefathers did. They will manage without the delicate tidbits, the cakes of various kinds.'

Sarai looked at Noa in mute despair.

'Do not weep, my dove,' the old woman whispered as soon as Ab-Ram's back was turned. 'I shall have a talk with Eliezer.'

Sarai's only consolation, though a feeble one, was in thinking of the fury of red-haired Edith, Lot's wife, who had a full chest of dresses, perfumes, boxes, ampules, and ingenious gewgaws. She would have to leave them all behind. And that would be good for her.

But, by the gods, the copper-haired woman proved to be less upset than any of the others. She admitted that she regretted having to depart from Ur, but as her husband had so decided in counsel with his uncle, the wife should submit without question to her husband's will. Though Noa burst into a rude laugh, Sarai willy-nilly had to rub her eyes and restrain

her indignation. 'After all, she could not make herself out to be a worse wife than the 'red-hair.'

Edith's tranquillity derived from a mysterious task on which her husband, the meek but inventive Lot, was engaged. Hidden behind a clump of undergrowth, he was working on the construction of a cart. A cart on wheels, just like the one in which the *melek melakim* had ridden. Of course, not of gold but of wood; and it would not be drawn by extravagant demons, but by respectable oxen. But it would be a cart. Edith, surrounded by all her things, would ride in the cart. Even the gods had never yet travelled so comfortably in this land.

Ab-Ram knew of his nephew's activity, but, antagonistic as always to novelties, he did not take any close interest in it. He only warned Lot that the cart was not to use up too much wood. Ab-Ram would have need of the wood which he had bought when the platform covering the city steps had been removed after the king's departure. What for? He would say in due time. And the innate ingenuity of the son of Haran would also be called into service.

For his part, Ab-Ram was occupied in preparing a litter for his father. Padded with soft sheepskins, it would be carried between two camels. The old chief would be able to sit or lie in it as he wished. He would be able to pull aside the curtains and look out on the world, or draw them together to protect himself against the sun and the flies. The stone teraphim, wrapped in soft cloth, would also travel in the litter.

Obed of the Gutian tribe, Terah's slave, watched these preparations with a malevolent eye. He was a prisoner. When Ab-Ram returned from the city after seeing his father he gave orders that Obed was to be fettered. No one knew why. Ab-Ram was not in the habit of explaining why he made decisions. On the first day old Noa herself took food to the prisoner.

'Our lord has punished you for the cake you devoured,' she cried triumphantly.

'What cake?' the slave asked, genuinely astonished.

'Don't pretend you don't know, you son of a dog! The cake sent to Terah son of Nabor last spring, when he fell ill with the ague. You ate it!'

'Your lord has a long memory. Why did he not imprison me before?'

Noa had no answer to that question, and she walked away, content in her sense of justice. Obed sluggishly turned to the food. There was plenty, Ab-Ram allowed no one to be starved. The slave slowly ate piece after piece, ruminating on the punishment that had suddenly overtaken him.

What was the real reason for it? The cake eaten a year ago, or the confusion in the camp?

Sep-Sin said to Ab-Ram, who was astonished at his arrival:

'Blessed be all thy days, son of Terah. Do not think the guards you posted on the roads have been negligent. I passed by them, but they did not see me, for I dimmed their sight for a moment. . . . If I remember aright, you have not previously posted guards?'

'Truly, I have not posted guards before.'

'There is as much activity in the tents as if you were intending to depart.'

'Your servant will be driving the herds to a new pasturage in the next day or two.'

'I have heard in the city that the *Patesi* is to number you Hebrews and collect a poll-tax.'

'I know. So Hammurabi son of Sin-Muballit has commanded.'

'Hitherto you have not paid tribute?'

'Never. We are a free people.'

'Then what do you intend to do, Ab-Ram?'

Ab-Ram pondered on what he should reply. Was Sep-Sin worthy of his confidence? His innate caution overcame him.

'I am in no position to wage war against the Babylonian,' he said evasively.

'You say justly. Listen! Awen-El, our *sanga-mahhu*, has sent me to you. If you give him your cloak - this one' . . . with his finger he touched the cloak around Ab-Ram's shoulders . . . 'he will cast a spell so that the *Patesi* will not dare to touch you.'

Ab-Ram shook his head.

'I will not give away the cloak of Nergal-Sar.'

'Madness speaks through your lips, son of Terah! Do you prefer subjection to the Babylonian?'

'When I was young, Sep-Sin, I was instructed that it is not becoming for a man to break a friendship he has made, even though he be threatened with death.'

'Is that your last word?'

'The only word your servant possesses.'

The priest shrugged his shoulders and took his leave. Ab-Ram remained standing, sunk in thought. He had answered impulsively; but now he felt

doubtful whether he had done right to answer thus. He decided to seek counsel of his father and brother.

Terah son of Nahor had come out from the city a few days before. Eliezer and Sur had previously brought the old master's beloved collections secretly out to the camp. Terah had taken up his abode with Nahor. Though Ab-Ram was his father's representative as head of the tribe, Nahor had the right of seniority. The corpulent Nahor would gladly have renounced the honour, for his garrulous old father insisted on continual replies and observations from his son.

Now Terah was sitting on a sheepskin spread on the ground; in front of him was a pile of clay tablets brought out from his house. Over several decades he had collected a large number of these tablets, and because of their weight Ab-Ram had advised him to leave at least half of them behind. The selection caused him no little trouble, for no one in the camp could read, and Terah himself did not always remember by its appearance what each tablet contained. He was afraid he would leave the most valuable behind. Stretched out on a bench, Nahor was breathing more heavily than usual, providing an accompaniment to his father's complaints.

'I remember this tablet, well,' Terah muttered, laying aside the tablet he had in his hands. 'It contains a spell against broken bones. A very effective, helpful spell. . . I'll take it. . . This jagged one is supposed to be good against boils. . . But it isn't much good. . . I once set it against my thigh, where I had a boil as big as my fist, and it was no use at all, though it was still whole then. . . The boil burst only when a magician put some cow dung on it. . . I'll take this little one. . . It's of help against forgetfulness. If I take it in my hand and close my eyes I remember everything. . . I like effective spells. . . These two . . . now these two were helpful, very helpful! But they're no longer of any use to me. . . Or to you, Nahor. . . They may be of service to some young man. . .'

'What are they good for, my father?'

'They give assurance that love shall be mutual,' Terah explained with a smile. 'I have tested their potency many a time. . . Long since. . . Long since. . . They were extraordinarily effective.'

He carefully rubbed the dust off the love-spells, smiling at the memories associated with them. Suddenly his face clouded, and he sighed.

'Milcah!' he called. 'Give this to some young girl. . . Then she will be of having her love returned.'

Nahor's wife, who was seated at the entrance, with sewing in her hand,

trembled when she heard her name called. Her father-in-law had no idea of the thoughts passing through the head of his tranquil, prudent daughter-in-law whom life had so bitterly cheated. Like all the other women, Milcah was depressed at the forthcoming departure. Above all because of her husband. For Nahor could never mount an ass or a camel. Who would carry him in a litter? Whatever happened, he would not survive the journey. He would suffer torments, he would be shaken to death. Poor Nahor. . . . He was good. . . . (He is good, she corrected herself with a feeling of shame.) He has an insatiable belly, but a wise head and a just heart. When he died what would she do? She should return to her brother, but life in dependence on Edith would be unbearable. ' . . . I will not be the red-head's slave,' she thought angrily. 'I will not. It is Ab-Ram's duty to take me as his wife. . . . The younger brother always takes the widowed and childless sister-in-law. . . . Ab-Ram is a man of energy. . . . I have never had cross words with Sarai. . . . I might have children again. . . . If father-in-law wasn't here I would take counsel with Nahor. But perhaps it would be better not to say anything to Nahor yet awhile. Supposing he was angry! Truly, he should not be angry. . . . After all, it is not his fault, or mine. . . .'

A shadow fell across her. Ab-Ram looked down at her and inquired after his father. Confused by his unexpected approach, Milcah stammered something incoherently, and fled, pressing the tablet to her breast.

As Ab-Ram entered the tent he bowed before the teraphim, as custom required, then fell at his father's feet, greeted his brother, and sat down on a bench. He stroked his greying beard, not knowing quite how to begin. He was afraid Terah son of Nahor would order him to hand Nergal-Sar's cloak back to the priests and so buy the possibility of remaining in Ur. And then what was he to do? Woe to him who is an affliction to his father, but woe also to him who breaks a friendship. The throat of a perfidious man is an open grave.

Nahor son of Terah took advantage of the silence to say something. Contrary to his custom, he did not resort to proverbs. In simple words he expressed the thoughts Milcah was thinking in secret, that he would not survive the journey being planned. He would give up the ghost before the first halting-place. He did not complain, for death was better than subjection. He did not conceal that he would be sorry to leave this life. No one was ever in any hurry to die. 'Brother Ab-Ram, the gods have given you a not common mind. Our father, Terah son of Nahor,

has made you the head of the tribe. Surely you can find some other means of avoiding enslavement than departing hence? Surely the *Patesi's* rapacity would be satisfied with a ransom? I will give all I have to remain here.'

He looked imploringly into his brother's face; Ab-Ram lowered his eyes.

'Deign to listen to my words, father, and you too, brother,' he began slowly, thoughtfully. 'I have not spoken of any ransom, and I shall not talk with the *Patesi*, since we have decided to pretend that we shall go willingly into subjection, like sheep driven to the slaughter. Because of that device we have gained the time necessary to secure our departure. I think that all talk of a ransom is in vain and its effects would be brief, for the Babylonian desires to rule over all men, and we shall not satisfy him with less. You, brother Nahor, will not die. Do not fear the journey overmuch (Ab-Ram's voice had a note of genuine affection). I shall have a litter prepared for you as comfortable as that in which our father, Terah son of Nahor, will travel.'

'Good news is like fresh water. In any case I would not like to be the camels carrying that litter,' the corpulent Nahor tried to jest.

'I have come here,' Ab-Ram continued, 'with another question which desire to lay before your judgement, father and brother. Two men concluded a pact of friendship, and exchanged their cloaks in token that they were as one. Soon afterward the older and more worthy of these two men died. When he died he was wearing his friend's cloak. What would you say of the one who remained, if he were forced to give his dead friend's cloak to others?'

'I would say he was the son of a bitch and a jackal,' Terah exclaimed impetuously.

'It is better to set coals of fire on your head than to offend a friend,' Nahor assented.

'My soul is glad to hear your answer. Since only by behaving so villainously could we avoid having to depart.'

Nahor grew anxious and began to pant:

'One palm is not like another. Brother, tell us of whom you speak.'

'Not the names are important, but the thing itself. Truth is one. I have asked. You have answered. I repeat again: be not afraid, brother Nahor. You will travel comfortably in the litter.'

'I am curious to know what kind of litter the Babylonian will prepare for you,' Terah snorted. 'I hear you talking about all except the

one thing that threatens us. If the *Patesi* overtakes us not only Nahor but all of us will die. The Babylonian will shatter us like dust in the wind.

'Rest assured, father, and deign to have confidence in your servant and son. The Babylonian will not overtake us. . . .'

'Rest assured! Rest assured!' the old man cut back. 'I am not at all assured. We shall have to journey for more than a month to get beyond the frontiers of Hammurabi.'

'As soon as the waters fall we shall cross to the other bank. The cattle will swim across; the people, camels, asses and articles will be carried on rafts. To this end I have bought timber. The water will not sweep us away, for we shall stretch a rope across the river. From the river we shall move eastward along the canal which the people call "Abundance". Only later shall we turn northward. . . .'

'And then what? Then what? The Babylonian's rule extends to the other side of the river also. Elam is his and Suza is his. By the silver vessel of Nannar-Sin! We shall never escape, unless your God curtains us with a cloud or becomes a pillar of fire. . . .'

'If He wishes He will do that too, father.'

Only on the first day did Noa take the trouble of attending to the of the fettered prisoner. Having satiated her long-standing feeling of injury, she grew indifferent, and sent slaves with the food. They went gladly, for, though he had a round head, prominent ears, and short nose, Obed was a well-built, sturdy fellow. His legs were fettered, but his arms were free. He embraced the girls fervently, for he was thoroughly bored. It was true that when he clutched at Hagar she struck him on the forehead with a pot full of soup; but all the men of the camp knew that Hagar was as ill-tempered as a snake, and never let any man come near her. The other girls proved to be more gracious. They squatted down beside the prisoner to tell him all the news of the camp. From Sella, Edith's hand-maid, who accompanied Ketura, Obed learned of the problem with which Lot was afflicted. That ingenious man had made a cart, a cart on wheels, fine, strong, perfect. They had already tried it out in the camp. 'My lady sat in it like a queen,' Sella related rapturously. 'The oxen drew it easily, the wheels turned, but they grated like birds chattering. The son of Haran led the oxen and danced with joy. No one was surprised at his dancing, for who else could have built such a clever thing? Ab-Ram son of Terah himself came and praised it. And he said: "Build a second

for your uncle, Nahor." And the son of Haran danced still higher, for Ab-Ram never praises him. Until suddenly my lady says: "I can smell burning. Something is on fire." Everybody laughed. How could there be fire? But my lady, who is capricious, said: "Stop! I shall get off. Something is burning. . . . Something is burning." And she was right. Smoke was coming from the wheels, and the pole that holds the wheels was so charred that it was black. Evidently there are demons who do not want us to ride in carts. That is only befitting to a queen. . . .

Obed listened so attentively to Sella's long story that he forgot his food.

"Tell the son of Haran," he said, "that I know what must be done to prevent the demons burning the axle. I saw it done more than once when the *melek melakim* was in the city."

The girl clasped her hands:

"You know? Tell me quickly! I will tell him."

"I shall not tell you. I shall tell the son of Haran."

Sella sped like an arrow, and soon afterward Obed saw Lot coming; the son of Haran was rather uneasy lest the slave should be lying. Obed assured him that he knew what to do to prevent the axles getting hot. But only he could do it.

"Free me from this block, I ask you, my lord. I shall save your fine cart, and then you can fetter me again, if it be the will of Ab-Ram son of Terah that I should remain fettered."

"I cannot do that without Ab-Ram's knowledge," Lot exclaimed mournfully.

"In that case the demons will consume your labour with fire."

Lot started back angrily, and ran to find his uncle. He was not in his tent, and Sarai could not say where he had gone. Lot decided to go and see his grandfather, whose permission would be quite sufficient; besides, it would be easier to get permission from the inquisitive old man than from Ab-Ram. But in this intention, too, he was doomed to disappointment. The tent flap was fastened, and only Milcah was sitting outside, thoughtful and inactive.

"Whom are you seeking?" she asked her brother. "My husband, Nahor son of Terah, is asleep. And there is no one else here."

"I am seeking our grandfather, Terah son of Nahor. Where is he?"

"I do not know. He went off with Ab-Ram."

Ill-tempered and perspiring, Lot tried to find at least Eliezer. Perhaps

Ab-Ram's trusted servant and confidant would agree to accept responsibility for the slave's temporary release from the shackles. But Eliezer also was not in the camp. Evidently he had accompanied Ab-Ram and the old master.

Harassed and perplexed, Lot returned to Obed, who smiled derisively. 'If the moon rises before I touch the cart in order to work the spell,' he declared, 'the demons will burn it during the night.'

'What am I to do?' Lot wailed. 'Perhaps I could have the cart brought here?'

'It will be set alight if you touch it. Listen to me, son of Haran: summon two men, or four men, choose the strongest men in the camp. Let them take off my shackle and lead me to your cart. Let them hold your servant by the throat. . . . Afterward they can bring me back. What do you fear? I shall save your cart. . . . You can fetter me in the block again afterward.'

'I dare not, I dare not,' Lot sighed.

'You dare not? You're afraid? Truly, then you are excessively timid, son of Haran. What am I that I could do any harm? A miserable worm, a slave of no importance. Release me for only one moment, and your cart will roll along as smoothly as the Babylonian's chariot. . . .'

Terah son of Nahor, Ab-Ram son of Terah, and Eliezer the Damascene had ridden on asses down the river to find a spot suitable for the proposed crossing. It was no easy task, for the banks were underwashed and quaggy. And they were overgrown with a forest of reeds twice as high as a man, as solid as the wilderness, and completely hiding the river. However, this last circumstance was in their favour.

Terah, bored with sitting in a tent, talked without cease, especially to Eliezer. The old servant was a good listener. He gazed into Terah's eyes and smacked his lips with appreciation. Ab-Ram went in front, sunk in thought. He had plenty to think about. For it was one thing to tell his father and brother: we will cross the river; but quite another to carry out the plan. As he gazed at the yellow, turbid waters of the Euphrates he appreciated the difficulties of the undertaking. The usually sluggish current was running fast, as if the river had hastened its speed in order to emulate its twin brother, which is named Tigris, the arrow.

They rode for a long time, and at last found a dry bank with old trees growing on it. The approach to the water was firm, and not too steep.

'We shall set across from here,' Ab-Ram said.

They dismounted and, standing side by side, gazed at the foaming waves. Eliezer broke off a branch and threw it into the water. The branch spun round and floated away swiftly. They were silent.

'Are you sure of your god?' Terah turned to his son.

'Yes, father.'

'You know him barely a year and he means so much to you?'

'It seems to me that I have known about Him ever since the day I left my mother's womb, and I have sought Him every time I gazed on high....'

'But has he sought you too?'

'Oh, yes. He summoned me first.'

'If he helps us to cross successfully I will glorify him.'

'Is the rope ready?' Ab-Ram asked Eliezer.

'It is ready, my lord. As thick as a stripling's arm, and so long that it would go right round the camp. All our palm fibre has gone into the making of it.'

'Tomorrow you and I will cross the river by boat. We shall see whether we can tie it to something.'

Eliezer strained his gaze:

'My eyes discern trees on the farther bank....'

'Let us go back now,' Terah shivered. 'It is cold.'

They mounted their asses and rode back along the reeded bank. Now that they were going upstream the river seemed even more menacing. The asses went side by side, the riders' knees jostled one another. Ab-Ram gazed at the sky slowly turning rosy, and thought:

'Thou art there and hearest me. Without Thee I shall perish and all who have entrusted their lives to me. I shall be the murderer of my father and my tribe. O, let it not be so. What am I without Thee? As feeble and blind as a puppy. But Thou wilt help me. I stretch out my hand to Thee, and Thou wilt seize it....'

Passing a turn in the river, they saw before them the city of Ur; it was flooded with the light of the sunset. The low sun, peering from beneath heavy clouds, cast a brilliant light, in which the tower, the temple, and the royal castle seemed to be burning. On the slopes of the man-made hill the houses rose like the outspread scales of a fir-cone.

They gazed at the familiar picture with very different feelings. Terah felt deep regret. He had spent many good years, many fine years, in that city. He had grown accustomed to it, he had drawn from it many delights

available to man. The accursed Babylonian! Would that he had never been born! Eliezer gazed at the city with an inveterate yearning for his hundred times more beautiful, native city of Damascus, which he could never hope to see again. Ab-Ram looked with dislike, and a lively desire to get away from this spot as quickly as possible. At that moment the voice which had accompanied him for some months: 'Get thee out of this country, get thee out of this land', sounded with especial strength in his ears.

They urged on the asses, in order to reach the camp before the night was fully come. A humid mist rose from the river, so Ab-Ram wrapped his father in his own cloak. The cones of the tents were rising black before them when they saw Lot son of Haran running to meet them. Stammering incomprehensibly he rushed up to his uncle, knelt down, knocked his head against the ass's hoof, whined, howled, clung to Ab-Ram's legs as he dismounted. 'Uncle Ab-Ram! Uncle Ab-Ram!' he groaned. 'Kill me! The slave Obed has escaped.'

They said nothing, though they fully understood what this news meant. It is not fitting for men to lament like women, so without a word they went to Nahor's tent. Only when there did Terah give vent to an alleviating anger:

'Ye gods! O, ye gods! Why didn't I myself strangle that carrion with my own hands? The reptile! The informer! The spy! Is this your god?' he turned furiously on Ab-Ram. 'He has treated us in a fine manner! You believe in him, but he has betrayed us to the priests. He couldn't hold back a single slave. Any common demon could have done that.'

'Kill me, uncle!' Lot repeated tearfully.

'Hold your tongue!' Ab-Ram said harshly. 'Your tears will not bring back the fugitive. We must take counsel what we are to do now.'

'What is there to take counsel about?' Terah croaked. 'The only thing we can do is to make an abundant offering to the gods and demons. But quickly! If Obed sees the priests it will be too late.'

'An offering delights the hearts of the gods and appeases the demons,' Nahor declared. 'Perhaps the gods will have compassion on us and Obed will break his neck before he reaches the temple.'

'We must hurry if we are to be in time.'

'We'll be in time. That dog will not go to the temple until morning.'

In their excitement Nahor, Terah, and Eliezer forgot Ab-Ram. He sat with his head in his hands. In his soul he was not asking, not entreating, but crying out. He cried out to the Lord: 'I stretch out my hand, I grope

in the darkness, but Thou feignest that Thou seest it not. I do not draw back my hand, I seek, I seek . . . I believe . . . I wait. Thou art trying me to see whether I doubt. But I believe . . .

He sighed deeply. He rose to his feet.

'We shall not make any offerings, we shall not shed any blood,' he said resolutely. 'My God will bring us forth.'

They were silenced, abashed by the surety sounding in his voice. Terah wanted to object. He shrugged his shoulders.

'I believed you, but your god allowed a slave to escape.

'He allowed it in order to show His might. Deign to believe me still, father. Not one hair will fall from your head. And not one of you will perish. We shall leave this place the day after tomorrow, before dawn. We shall leave half the herds and flocks and half the tents in the camp. Eliezer, old friend, you will remain here for a certain time. You will light fires before the tents and will sound the trumpet, so that from the tower it will seem as though we are still here.'

'I will do all my lord commands.'

'You will leave half the herds here, Ab-Ram? You will impoverish the whole tribe.'

'That is the ransom of which Nahor spoke. The ransom for liberty. The less we have, the more surely shall we escape. Fear not!'

'Fear not, Ab-Ram; it is I . . . I again, Sep-Sin. You do not believe that I come as a friend? You still remember the golden coins which I once wheedled out of you? I swear by the memory of Nergal-Sar, by the glory of the Lord Most High whom he brought you to know, that you will not suffer treachery at my hand. . . . Obed, Terah's slave, our spy, has been with Awen-El . . .

'I know of Obed's escape. I guessed whither he would go.'

'Obed said you are making ready for flight. Awen-El has set a guard on the tower, to keep watch on your camp. When you begin to go out from thence, Awen-El will cause the asses, the cattle and camels to halt as though rooted to the ground, and he will come and take from your shoulders the cloak which he covets. . . . He can do that, Ab-Ram. Your herds will halt, or you and your people will circle round and round, forgetting which is your left, which is your right hand.'

'Is the Patesi also informed?'

'No one knows but Awen-El. Only when he has detained you and

taken the cloak will he send for the *Patesi* to come and see how much he owes to the priests. Ab-Ram! For the last time I ask you to be prudent: give up the cloak.'

'I have already said that I will not. I am not afraid of Aweni-El's magic, for the Lord will defend me against him. But I humbly ask you, my friend Sep-Sin, do not return to the city. Come with us.'

'With you? Into the wilderness?'

'We two together will tell the people about the Lord Most High. We two will achieve very much. You have knowledge and wisdom; but I, a simple man, possess nothing except the desire to serve the Lord. . . .'

'That desire is the most important of all, son of Terah. More important than knowledge and wisdom.'

'Yet any man can have it!' Ab-Ram exclaimed in wonder.

'I know not whether every mortal born of woman can have it. . . . I have it not. I will not go with you, Ab-Ram, for it is well with me here. I like my life. I can read tablets containing all the wisdom of the world; I can command others. . . . I have beautiful slaves, I have comfort. . . . You, people of the tents, do not know all the ingenious comfort in which we live. It is difficult to abandon that. And I have yet another reason for not going with you: I do not remember the name of my father. As a child I was given to the temple. We priests must be satisfied with the gods for our line. I have been given the god Sin as my father. How can I go among people, and be neither priest, nor the child of my father? Would not that restrain you, Ab-Ram?'

'No.'

'You would abandon all?'

'All I have and still more.'

'But I would not give up all. By the silver vessel of my father, Nannar-Sin, there you have the difference between us. . . . A great difference. . . . Blessed be all thy days, Ab-Ram! Blessings be on thy head!'

The Well of Silence

AB-RAM STRETCHED HIS ARMS AS THOUGH HE COULD NOT CONTAIN himself. Never before had he felt so happy. Ahead of him was a free and spacious expanse, broad, wide. . . . The caravan was led by an ass acting as guide – a very old and very wise ass. Behind it were camels, tied to the ass and to one another by ropes, and swaying along measuredly in single file. Then came more asses, then more camels, and people. This long procession formed the caravan's backbone. On both sides of it, projecting like ribs, were great herds and flocks of cattle and sheep, guarded by dogs and drovers. The oxen went in front, then the cows with calves, then goats, and sheep. They dawdled along, diligently chewing everything the preceding herds had left. Though half the livestock had been left behind at Ur, the droves and flocks were still imposing in their numbers. The question of halting-place was governed by the water problem, since, for understandable reasons, Ab-Ram had turned far aside from the river. In summertime the numerous 'wadis' were dry courses, but at this season they still retained some moisture. The men had only to dig a shallow well in the apparently dry bed of a torrent for it to fill after a while with water oozing up from under the surface. Each evening, when they halted for the night, the herdsmen would dig a number of these shallow wells, at which they watered the animals next morning.

On the right hand of the caravan was an extensive plain stretching as far as the river Tigris; on its left in the distance was a dark line, the belt of reeds fringing the channel of the Euphrates. The Hebrews had crossed the 'Great Water' a week before, on the memorable day of their departure from Ur. At one moment it had seemed that everything would be lost, for the rope to which the men hauling the raft across were clinging broke under the pressure of the waves, which were made more turbulent by the large number of cattle driven into the stream. The current had begun to

carry away the raft and the herds more and more swiftly. They had all lost their heads with fright; only Ab-Ram, standing on the raft and struggling against the current, had shouted: 'Fear not! The hand of the Lord is above us!' And it had come to pass that at a bend the water had driven the raft right against the bank. They had managed to clutch at bushes growing over the water, to stay and then to moor the raft. The broken rope had swept downstream with them, and they had caught it up and restrained the cattle carried away by the current. When, half dead with fear and exhaustion, they had scrambled safely on to the bank, they had been amazed to find that not one man, nor one head of cattle had been lost. They had all safely reached the farther bank. At which all the Hebrews had shouted: 'Great is the God of Ab-Ram!' They had spent the night on the bank, and, eating early, had drawn up in their present marching formation.

Whenever Ab-Ram recalled that incident he was conscious that, only a little more, and he would have been plunged into doubt. When the rope broke he felt as though a fibre had snapped in his breast. He was ready to curse God for having deceived him.

Since then six days had passed. They moved along unhurriedly, allowing the cattle and sheep to graze as they went. So far there had been nothing to indicate pursuit. Ab-Ram had taken a course farther to the east than usual, in order to avoid cultivated fields and human beings. From time to time they came upon old stock enclosures built of great rocks, capable of accommodating numerous herds, and very suitable places in which to halt for the night. They drove the flocks and herds into the yard; it was walled on three sides, and they closed the fourth, open side with barriers of thorn. Guards were posted, being changed at midnight. The guards gave long-drawn out shouts to one another to keep up their spirits and to testify to their watchfulness. These stone enclosures showed that the caravan was moving along an ancient track of the nomad tribes, and Ab-Ram thought with respect of the long dead generations who had laboriously carried these rocks from the distant mountains, in order to provide shelter for the generations to come. Perhaps his own forefathers had wandered along this track, and now their grandchildren were benefiting by their labour.

Ab-Ram started out of his reverie and pricked up his ears, for a distant call reached him. Evidently something had happened in the ranks behind him, for the chief of the tribe was being called. Surely it could be nothing

evil, for in the event of an attack, Lot, who was in charge of nearly a score of men acting as rearguard, would have given the agreed signal on the horn.

Changing his camel for an ass, which is more handy and agile, Ab-Ram set off at an ambling trot along the line of the caravan. As they saw him coming the men called cheerfully: 'Greetings, Ab-Ram, son of Terah!' They were happy, for they had no knowledge that any danger threatened them. The reason for their departure from Ur was still a secret known to only a few.

'Who called me?' he asked as he passed. He was told that he had been summoned from the car.

Sarai, Noa, Ketura, and Hagar were riding along side by side, on asses. Sarai was burnt with the desert wind, and her swarthy complexion had turned even darker. When she saw her husband she sprang off her ass and ran to him, lifting her large eyes to his face. Willy-nilly he had to stop.

'When shall we make a longer halt, my lord?' she asked. 'We cannot make butter nor collect the cream.'

'The cows will dry up completely with such milking,' Noa added her word. 'The drovers drive them on again before the women have milked half of them.'

'Before long we shall be making a halt of some days. Who called me, and for what purpose?'

'Terah son of Nahor desires to see you.'

'Then why are you detaining me, woman?' Ab-Ram cried angrily, and urged on his ass. Sarai pouted her lips discontentedly. Noa muttered: 'To expect sense from a man is like weaving a spider's web. We shall be making a long halt only when the cows have lost all their milk.'

Terah was riding in his litter at the tail end of the procession, since Ab-Ram thought that the safest part. If they were attacked from in front Lot would be able to escort his grandfather far from the field of battle. So he passed a further long line of laden animals, carrying bags of water, bags of flour, folded tents, bales of clothing, rolls of skins. Among them, creaking and shaking, came Lot's famous cart which had been the cause of so much trouble. The demons had not got it on fire. Before his escape Qbed had revealed that the axles needed to be greased thickly with sheep's fat. After the crossing of the river Ab-Ram assigned it to Nahor, ignoring Edith's anger and tears. But within a couple of days Nahor had preferred to return to the litter which had been prepared for him, as the

cart shook him about mercilessly. It was well enough to ride in if one stood in it, but not sitting. Now the affronted Edith did not want to dismount from her camel, from which she dominated all around her, and in the end her two little daughters and her chests of clothing travelled in the cart. The open back was railed off with poles, and the children rode in a kind of cage, very comfortably. Lot's children were beautiful, especially the younger, Lilith. She had inherited a luxuriant head of hair from her mother, and it gleamed in the sun like liquid copper mingled with gold. Lot was fond of his children; he played with them and caressed them as though they were not daughters, but sons.

The other small children of the tribe journeyed less comfortably, in bags thrown over their mothers' backs, or in baskets tied with rope and hung across the backs of asses. Only the little ones' inquisitive heads peered over the rims of the baskets. Those a little older sat astraddle in front of or behind their mothers, on asses. The lads and girls vied with one another, running along the caravan, throwing clods of earth at the birds, and parting the bushes in search of eggs.

Nahor was asleep, stretched out in his litter. As Ab-Ram passed him he felt alarmed at the sight of his brother's puffy and tormented face. Poor, Nahor's presentiments had been justified. Mulcah, riding beside him on an ass, held a clay tablet in her hand. 'A spell to bring Nahor back to health,' Ab-Ram thought sympathetically.

Unlike Nahor, Terah had not lost his strength. The journey was amusing him; he was always delighted with novelty. But at the moment he was furious with rage.

'Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes of him who awaits him,' he shouted angrily at his son. 'The demon Namtar might have carried me to the ends of the earth and back again, and you would have known nothing about it.'

'Deign to pardon your servant's delay, father. I turned back the moment I heard the call.'

'I dozed off and had an evil dream. I'll remember what it was in a moment. . . . Then I awoke and saw birds flying. There were thirteen of them. . . . And that is bad too. And yesterday I saw the new moon with my left eye. I'm afraid some evil is on its way. And that camel behind me spits. . . . It has spat on my head.'

'I shall give orders at once for the camel in front to have its rope shortened, and the one behind lengthened.'

'Aha, I've remembered the dream. Listen: I dreamed that in the river crossing the teraphim and all the tablets with the spells were lost.'

'You have the teraphim by your head, and the tablets are being borne by the third ass in front of you.'

'But I said it was a dream. . . . Why is the third ass carrying the tablets, and not the one immediately in front of me? I want to have the tablets quite close. . . . What do you think? What does such a dream signify?'

Ab-Ram was lost in meditation. Not over the significance of the dream which had visited Terah, but over himself. A year ago he would have been just as much struck by the dream as was his father. Now he listened to the story indulgently, as though it were a child's complaint.

'Surely it was a very evil dream?' Terah questioned, disturbed by his son's silence.

'Not at all, my father. That dream cannot presage anything evil, since the protection of the Lord Most High is over us.'

'I have respect for your god, but the demons are closer than he. The demons sit on a man's shoulder and tickle his throat, but your god is somewhere high in the heavens. Have you surveyed the land from that hill yonder? You didn't see anything? We are not being pursued?'

'I have surveyed the land, my father, and I saw nothing but the wilderness turning green and the mountains in the distance.'

Terah was puzzled, as though the very absence of any enemy was itself an unfavourable occurrence.

'What does it mean?' he pondered. 'I expect they'll attack from an ambush. . . . We must be prepared for an ambush, Ab-Ram. . . . How far have we come?'

'That rise on the left is the city of Uruk. I recognise the cliffs in which the tombs of the kings are built.'

'Woe! Woe! Only Uruk! A tortoise moves faster than we do. From Ur to Uruk is two days' journey, and we have been travelling a whole week.'

'But we set off southward from the city, the river carried us much farther down, and then we had to journey round the bend. That delayed us. At any moment now we shall be coming to the canal along which we shall journey as far as Lake Hior Damaj.'

'Water is an adornment to life, but the pursuit will overtake us at any moment. O, ye gods, send us a safe cavern; conceal us at the bottom of the sea. . . . What is that shout?'

The shout had come from the head of the caravan. Before Ab-Ram could set off to discover the reason for it, Eliezer rode up, sweating and panting. He jumped off the ass and fell at his master's feet.

'Live for ever, Ab-Ram!' he cried. 'The gods have led me and not deceived me. . . .'

'Say on!' Terah croaked. 'Where is the pursuit? Is it far away?'

Eliezer stared at him, failing to understand.

'Where are the priests? The *Patesi* and his soldiers? Surely they have already discovered that we are no longer in the camp?'

Then Eliezer understood, and he broke into a laugh. Regardless of his weariness and the respect due to his masters, he began to dance about, smacking his palms against his sides like a cock flapping its wings.

'Live for ever, my lord! No one is pursuing us. I will tell all, as soon as I get my breath. . . .'

'Here, drink some water mingled with wine.' Terah magnanimously handed the servant his own leather bottle. Eliezer took it respectfully, shook out a drop or two for the gods to drink, poured some more beneath his lords' feet, then set the bottle to his lips, and drank avidly with relish. He removed the bottle from his lips, shook out the last few drops, took a deep breath, and made an obeisance.

'Tell us what happened after our departure.'

'I remained, O my lord, as you had commanded. I lit fires before each tent, and asked the gods that you might go forth in safety. I sounded the horn very loud, and drove the cattle down to the river. I milked the cows; but I was not able to milk them all, and I was grieved at the loss of the milk. I was afraid demons would enter the empty tents and remain in them. On the fourth day the *Patesi* himself arrived with a guard in golden helmets and with two informers and two scribes. He was astonished when he found no one, and asked whether I was alone. Answering I said to him: "Live for ever, my lord! My lord Ab-Ram son of Terah has gone with his people and women up the river to seek the drovers who have gone astray with the droves. My lord was afraid that the lions had devoured them and the droves had scattered." Answering, the *Patesi* said: "Lie not, servant; your lord has fled from my face, for he has taken the women and children with him. Cursed be his days and cursed be his lot, for he shall not escape me." Then I, Eliezer, replied: "My lord has not fled. My lord fears no one, being a just man. He has taken the women and children, but

he has left the tents and all his treasures. Come and see! Was it ever known that a man should voluntarily leave such wealth behind him?"

'And I showed him the flocks and herds. And he saw the milk dripping from the cows' udders and saw that they were good milch-kine. And I showed him the trenches of grain. And he commanded the two informers to dig them up and measure them, and was greatly astonished. And I showed him the barrels of must, and the old barrels filled with matured wine, and he was astonished still more greatly. And he said: "Your lips speak the truth. I shall wait until Ab-Ram son of Terah returns." To which I said: "Take, I pray thee, these goods under thy care, and my lord when he returns will ask thee for them, for it is difficult for me alone to watch over them all, and I am afraid of robbers, of those who say stolen waters are sweetest and hidden bread more tasty. Ease me of this burden that my lord has laid upon me."

"To which he assented readily, saying: "I will do as thou desirest." And he at once commanded the scribes to note down the herds and the trenches and the barrels of wine. They were inscribing on tablets from noon till eventide and all the next day till eventide, and they inscribed three tablets with very small signs. On these tablets the *Patesi* imprinted his seal, and then he gave them to me. They are in the sack. . . . And the *Patesi* sent his men to guard the herds and to milk the cows, but broke out and no one asked me: "whither?"'

Ab-Ram beamed as he listened. Terah was sour.

'The *Patesi* has been enriched as never before!' he declared. 'We are impoverished. Neglect, squander, and you will have insufficiency as your companion, and poverty will overcome you like a man armed. . . .'

'Father, we have exchanged plenty for freedom. Let us rejoice that we need fear no early pursuit.'

'Woe to him who rejoices prematurely! The *Patesi* is not like the priests. The *Patesi* will wait, satiated with our goods; the priests will not wait. . . .'

'Live for ever, my lord! Grant that your servant may speak further. Deign to hear what I have heard. I arrived at the city of Uruk as my lord commanded me. I knocked at the house of Faleh, son of Elas, and said to him: "My lord, Ab-Ram, has sent me on a journey. Grant me, I pray thee, a night's lodging." Then Faleh washed my feet and showed me great honour. When the bread and salt were between us and we were dipping our bread together into the wine, I asked Faleh son of Elas, what

news. . . . Answering, Faleh said: "Here it is, quiet, for the dead lie in concord in the graves. But in Ur, the city of your lord, a great crime has been committed which it is terrible even to speak of." To which I said: "Tell me, Faleh, I pray thee." And we broke bread again. Faleh said: "A priest baru has killed the high priest, the *sanga-mahhu*, Awen-El, a man enlightened and learned. All the city of Ur was shaken with the news, and the murderer was thrown into the Well of Silence, for priests of the baru rank may not shed blood." And, greatly astonished, I asked what was the name of the priest who had been the murderer and had been thrown into the Well of Ashes. And he answered: "Sep-Sin. . . ."

'Sep-Sin?' Ab-Ram cried out in horror.

'Legends!' Terah said doubtfully. 'We know Sep-Sin well. A quiet man, he would not kill a sheep. And how could Faleh son of Elas know of such things?'

'He heard it from his sons, whom the priests took from him last year. They are twins, they are as like to each other as one ear of barley is to another ear. It was indicated to Faleh from the temple that the gods had taken a fancy to them and wanted to have them as servants. Faleh was alarmed, and handed them over at once; but his wife wept bitterly. Of all her children she loved these twins most of all. She still yearns after them, and whenever she has time she runs to Ur to see her sons, if only from a distance. Faleh told me he had beaten her severely and locked her up, rightly afraid the priests would think he regretted giving the boys to the gods; but even so she escapes from his house. She goes to Ur and stands on the square before the tower and gazes upward. When the boys see her they run to her secretly. From them she learned of what the priest Sep-Sin had done and what was done with him.'

'Sep-Sin in the Well of Ashes!' Ab-Ram repeated. 'He saved us, and himself perished. . . . Awen-El was my enemy.'

Unable to speak or think of anything else but this news, he said farewell to his father and returned to his former place at the head of the caravan. As he rode he again passed the familiar faces: Sarai dozing on her ass, her girls, the gazelle Sebi running around the caravan, Lot's daughter chattering away on the cart, Milcah with her tablet always in her hands, the old, blind Igal - the tribe's living memory - the obstinate, self-willed Mosa, Kephah who always liked to do everything in his own way, Hibal, Lot's drover, the chief cause of the frequent squabbles and conflicts. He looked at them all with unseeing eyes, for always he saw only Sep-Sin, and his

horrible death. 'We live in ingenious comfort' . . . Ashes in the throat, ashes in the ears, the nostrils, the eyes. . . . Ashes . . .

Ab-Ram urged on his ass. He was surrounded by the green plain, but his eyes saw streams of ashes. It was as though he could hear their rustle, as if they were sifting round him, choking, throttling. He tried to persuade himself that Sep-Sin might have murdered Awen-El for some motive not connected with the Hebrews' departure. But a feeling as strong as certainty told him it was not so. Sep-Sin had done it for him, Ab-Ram. That explained why they had gone forth without incident, and why they were now moving as free men towards the distant world, while Sep-Sin, the easy-going scoffer, remained alone in the Well of Silence.

'O, valiant friend, good friend, you have sacrificed yourself in order to save the Truth which I bear. . . . I shall always remember you as long as I live, my friend, Sep-Sin. I shall honour your memory and forget you never, Sep-Sin.'

A new meeting broke in on Ab-Ram's thoughts. The sturdy drover Hiel was walking along with one arm round his daughter Azubah, who was nestling against him. They were not expecting their lord's approach, and they were unable to release their arms betimes. Ab-Ram recalled that even before their departure from Ur Sarai had spoken to him of the sin of this couple. Absorbed in the problems connected with the departure, he had neglected the matter. Now, as leader and goel of the tribe he had a feeling of guilt.

'I am comfortable here,' Sep-Sin had said. . . . Ashes . . . ashes . . .

At the spot where the twin rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, the nourishers of the land, come so close to each other that half a day would suffice for the journey from one bank to the other, a canal had been dug, linking the two channels. Beyond the canal extended Assyrian possessions. At this narrow ribbon of slowly flowing water the lord of the world, Marduk, and his favourite, Hammurabi, lost their importance. Beyond it the Hebrew tribe could wander in peace, not fearing pursuit.

Ab-Ram had a feeling of distrust as he drew near to the desired frontier. He armed the men, and gave orders for the flocks and herds to be driven in a solid pack. Despite the news Eliezer had brought, he was afraid that at the canal he would have to fight Babylonian forces. But a sluggish stillness lay over all the land. Wildfowl were quacking and cackling calmly in the reeds, so it was clear that they had not been disturbed. The ford,

paved with flat stones so that travellers should not crumble down the banks of the canal, was unguarded. Not till late in the afternoon after they had made the crossing did they fall in with a group of Assyrian soldiers with thick curly beards, broad shoulders, and muscular arms. They glanced at the caravan as it dragged past them, but showed no interest in it. Their task was not to trouble travellers, but to fish out the tree trunks carried down by the river after every flood, for such timber was too valuable to let it go as a gift to their Babylonian neighbours. In any case, what warrior would cast a reluctant eye on herds of cattle entering his domain? Only a caravan moving in the contrary direction might arouse his anger.

When the Babylonian frontier was two days' journey behind them, Ab-Ram noticed a clump of trees growing alongside a rapid stream, and decided to pitch tents for a long rest. Seventy days had passed since their departure from Ur. They had left at the beginning of the month of Adar; now they were close to the end of Yiar, the time of magical spring, of short, warm nights, of luxurious days, and exuberant green. After a rest they would travel onward to reach the lofty, cool mountains, the parents of the stream, before the arrival of the hot season.

It was also necessary to call a halt in the march because of Nahor son of Terah. During the journey the corpulent fellow had grown so thin that the skin hung on him like a loose robe, and his furrowed face seemed that of a man a hundred years old. This sudden loss of fat had greatly enfeebled him, and so, when the camp was pitched, he lay in his tent as though dead. Milcah anxiously gave him cream to drink, and honey and goatflesh to eat. She still touched the spell-tablet from time to time, when Ab-Ram was anywhere in the vicinity. She herself did not know whether to rejoice or grieve that Nahor was still alive. She had already grown reconciled to the thought of his death; she had counted on marrying Ab-Ram and having a motherhood which would recompense her for her previous sorrows. Nothing of this was coming to pass. At first she had had a husband impotent because he was too fat. Now he was still impotent because he was too thin. Either way it was bad.

Terah son of Nahor, energetic, unburdened, talked joyfully of the undoubted fury of the Babylonian, and the punishment he would inflict on the *Patesi* when the news leaked out that the tribe had fled. By the breasts of the goddess Ningal! The god of Ab-Ram had shown himself to be a very powerful god. It was worth while worshipping him.

But Terah was not only delighted at their successful flight. The old chief was reviving memories of his youth, memories which had been overlaid by his many years of life in the city. For he had spent his childhood on an ass's back. He had been in the west, on the farther side of the wilderness; he had seen many cities unlike those of these parts, and mountains inhabited by the giants, Rephaim. In the land of Gerar his father, Nahor son of Serug had bored a well in the rock. 'If we go there,' Terah said to Ab-Ram, 'remember to mention it to the king. I recall it perfectly. It was a good, copious well abundant in water.'

He had hardly closed his mouth when he noticed with lively satisfaction that fire was being lighted in a stove shaped like a trough. How this stove had reached this spot was a secret known only to Noa and Eliezer, in whom the women had an ally. Seeing his father's delight, Ab-Ram did not go into the question. As the stove was here, let it be. Noa was already plastering cakes against its notched sides, and everybody waited impatiently for them to cook.

'Would you agree, my father,' Ab-Ram asked, 'if your son called the men of the tribe together to-morrow? I want to tell them of the danger which has been averted from us, and to hold judgment on Hiel.'

'Am I governing the tribe?' Terah answered, not taking his eyes off the stove. 'Summon whom you like. . . . Aha, that one's done already.'

Eliezer was helping Lot to shift the tent. It was the third time the son of Haran had shifted it because his wife was not satisfied with the site. Hearing Ab-Ram's call, Eliezer ran up swiftly.

'A nagging wife is a leaking roof in the rainy season,' he said by way of explanation.

'Truly, it is so, Eliezer. But today you will go from tent to tent and summon the men of the tribe to stand before me tomorrow morning. I desire to hold judgement on Hiel, of whom it is said that he sins with his daughter Azubah. Tell Hiel of the assembly, that he may bring his witnesses. And those who accuse him, let them bring witnesses also. . . .'

His servant fell at his feet before he had ended: °

'Live for ever, my lord! Already tongues are wagging that your god is clearly not concerned with justice, since you have neglected it. . . .'

Ab-Ram's face went black with anger.

'The Lord Most High is Justice!' he exclaimed.

'Deign to forgive thy servant. I only repeated what is being said.'

Justice and Judgement

EARLY NEXT MORNING OVER 150 MEN, COMPOSING THE HEBREW TRIBE, assembled before the tent of the chief. Among them were kinsmen and kindred of the sons of Eber, nephews and step-brothers of the line, natural sons, and the descendants of natural sons. They included no slaves, except perhaps the children of prisoners of war, who had been granted their freedom, like Eliezer, who sat in counsel with the members of the tribe. A son of a male and female slave could not become a member of the tribal community. Just as it was regarded as sacrilege to offer the gods a sacrifice of cattle which had borne the yoke if only for one day, so in the counsels of free peoples the man who had never decided his own fate could not have any voice.

The seated tribesmen were alike one to another in features and attire. They all had long, thin noses turned downward at the tip, swarthy complexions, dark eyes, curling beards; they were all tall, and had sloping shoulders. On their heads they wore white kerchiefs encircled with a black string. The ends of the kerchiefs protected their shoulders. When they spoke they gave off the scent of garlic, which they had eaten because they knew they had been summoned to counsel. For, unlike wine, which makes man merry and befuddles him, garlic sharpens the wits and intensifies the power of concentration. Removing their sandals and tucking their feet under them, they waited for the head of the tribe to speak.

The accused man, Hiel, was kept outside the circle. He alone showed signs of anxiety, and looked about him with moody eyes. His two kinsmen were to testify on his behalf. They hung their heads gloomily; evidently they had little to say in defence of their brother.

Ab-Ram, wrapped in his white cloak, seated himself in the place of honour, among the oldest of the tribesmen. Next to him was blind Igal, son of Eser, an old man famous for his infallible memory. Recourse was

had to him whenever it was necessary to cite the prescriptions of the law. Besides being endowed with such a memory, apparently Igal had the gift of discovering water, sometimes a considerable distance away. This gift, if he had it, had not been exploited by the tribe, which had dwelt beside a river for many years.

On Ab-Ram's other hand was Lot. Nahor and Terah were absent; Nahor because of his debility, while the old man had gone with Sur to catch fish in the torrent. He was happy that he did not have to occupy himself with such an oppressive thing as judgement. For many years now he had left all such matters to Ab-Ram.

The men sitting motionless (they were all married, for smooth faces could not be members of the council) together with women, adolescents, and children, made up the Hebrew tribe, the race, a community complete in itself, and not subject to anyone except its own chief. This chief was always the senior representative of the descendants of Eber in a direct line; or, as in this case, the son to whom such a father had transferred the honour during his own lifetime. The chief of the tribe had the power of life and death over every member. He settled disputes, passed judgement, and administered justice. The members of the tribe were under obligation to serve him faithfully, to serve him blindly. So it had been all through the ages, and no one imagined that it could be subject to change. In return for their obedience, the chief cared diligently for their needs, was obliged to assure them good pasturage, to provide water and provisions, to guard them against danger, and if a stranger injured any member of the tribe the chief must pursue the offender even to the ends of the earth, and execute the tribal vengeance upon him. In this system the Hebrews felt happy and free. Their dependence on the chief did not seem any more oppressive to them than the child's dependence on its father. They regarded it as natural. For a community never governs; one thinks for all. They paid no heed to the commands of any man except the head of the tribe. They themselves reaped what they sowed, and took for their needs as much as they wished. They had a high esteem of their own dignity, and so, when Ab-Ram spoke and told them for the first time the reason for the hurried departure from Ur, they were dumbfounded and furious. They regarded it as highly dishonourable to be counted like head of cattle, numbered, treated as royal property, driven to work, or taken by force to serve in the army. At the very thought they clenched their fists, and before Ab-Ram had ended they were shouting in chorus as they had once

before, after the safe crossing of the river: 'Great is Ab-Ram son of Terah! Glory to Ab-Ram son of Terah! Blessed be all his days!'

'That is not so,' Ab-Ram vigorously protested. 'Know ye that I did nothing. We have been saved by the Lord Most High, who veiled the eyes of the enemy.'

They took no notice of his correction, but shouted and praised their leader even more fervently. Now Ab-Ram turned to praise Lot, against whose drovers there had been not one complaint all the days of the journey. At last the son of Haran had convinced his people how distressing and injurious their previous behaviour had been. Lot reddened, and stammered that he had done no particular service in regard to this matter. He himself did not know why the happy change had come about. This sincere confession aroused unconcealed but quiet laughter in the circle. Ab-Ram sternly reprimanded them. Then he called on Hiel to stand in the centre of the ring, together with his defenders. He also called on those who had made the accusations to present them openly and aloud. Amid a profound silence five or six men rose to their feet. In turn they unanimously declared that at first Hiel had committed this monstrous deed in secret, but that of late he had fornicated with his daughter almost openly in the sight of all.

A mutter of shocked indignation ran through the congregation. Ab-Ram called on the defence. They declared, but without conviction in their voices, that Hiel had been drunk when he violated his daughter. It is known that a drunken man is only an unintelligent child, whom a crafty woman can lead whither she wishes. It was all the fault of Azubah, who had been enslaved by a demon; she was a fornicating lizard, a harlot. . . .

This argument was interrupted by laughter. Some asked whether Hiel had been continually drunk for a couple of months.

'Let him speak for himself,' Ab-Ram demanded.

The accused man looked about him with an evil look. He showed no sign of contrition, but rather angry obstinacy. He confirmed his kinsmen's statement that he had been drunk to the point of oblivion. He had not known what he was doing. And afterward . . . Afterward he did not think he had done anything so blameworthy. . . . A woman was a woman. One concubine or another. . . . After all, he had not taken her as wife.

'Your speech is the speech of a serpent, and it stinks in my nostrils,' Ab-Ram answered indignantly. 'Knew you not that to join your blood with your own blood is a defilement worse than murdering a man?'

'I did not know,' the accused man persisted. 'I am a simple man, I do not know the law. They say the king of Babylon ordered that the law was to be inscribed on tablets. But who among us knows what is written on them?'

Ab-Ram's eyes flashed angrily beneath his kerchief.

'Fool!' he hissed. 'On such ground you will not hollow out any well. None of us knows writing, but everyone knows the law. Our law, the law of our fathers and forefathers, the law by which men were governed before the Flood poured over the earth. We have no need of the law of the king of Babylon. We do not need to know it. Beyond the water runs the law of Babylon, on this side the law of Assyria, which perhaps is entirely different. Law must be one everywhere, on this and the other side of the wilderness, on this and the other side of the water. It does not need to be carved on tablets, for everyone knows it from the moment he passes from childhood to manhood. Igal, son of Eser, tell us what the law says of Hiel's deed. And let someone bring Azubah, that she may hear the sentence.'

The old, blind man coughed several times, and chewed the words in the depths of his grey beard before he pronounced them:

'My lord commands, therefore I speak. The law says:

"If a man lie with his daughter-in-law, he shall be bound and thrown into the river, and the woman shall be burnt with fire.

"If a man lie with his mother, he shall be burnt alive with fire, and she also."

Outside the ring there was scuffling, and a suppressed wail. Azubah was dragged into the middle. Igal turned his dead, lack lustre eyes on her, continuing in the same indifferent tone:

"The man who lies with his mother-in-law shall be scourged and driven into the wilderness, and the woman shall be thrown into the river.

"The man who lies with his daughter, to give her his seed, so that she bears, shall be thrown into the river, and the woman shall be burnt with fire."

'Thou hast said,' Ab-Ram curtly declared, 'Men of the tribe! Did you hear what the law declares?'

'We heard. And so be it!' they answered in chorus.

Azubah's groaning rose to a desperate howl. All Hiel's arrogance was gone. He flung himself at his judge's feet.

'Mercy, my lord!' he cried. 'Be just! Be just, Ab-Ram! By thy great

god I swear that the first time I was drunk and knew not what I was doing; but then I deemed that you permitted it, as you did not declare yourself against it.'

Ab-Ram rested his face in his hands, his elbows on his knees; knitting his brows, he thought. They all gazed at him in silence. They waited. The girl moaned. Hiel, lying on the ground, groaned deeply. Lot bit his lips. He felt sorry for them both, but especially for the girl. For she was still only a child. It was a terrible thing to be burnt alive. Old Igal, having played his part, sat dozing, as indifferent to what would follow as if he were the personification of the law. The others looked at Ab-Ram, hoping he would be strict. As the law thus pronounced, there should be no mitigation of the punishment.

Ab-Ram felt all eyes fixed on him. He rejected them, he shielded himself with his palm against their insistence, for he desired to consider what sentence the Lord expected him to declare. Not what the people desired, but God. Hitherto, when passing sentence he had never departed from the law. Now for the first time in his life he was troubled with doubts whether the law was always just. 'Be just!' Hiel had exclaimed. 'Be just, Ab-Ram!' Nergal-Sar had enjoined, when asked how best the Lord could be glorified. But what was it, this justice? He, Ab-Ram, was called a just man, and he was proud to be called. He was just because he laid everything on the scales of his mind and scrupulously balanced the pans. He gave everybody their due: ten talents for ten talents, a hundred for a hundred. He demanded only that which was due to him, never a shekel more. He would not deprive another man of his ox, or his ass, or his woman, or his house, or his liberty. He would not shift a landmark from its place even if he knew that the demon guarding it was dead. He always rewarded the good others did to him, and punished or took vengeance for evil. That was why he was generally called a just man. He, too, had been satisfied with such justice, so long as he had not desecrated, unwitting whether in dream or in reality, the tangled current of life, the universality of the guilt and the common burden of sin. Such justice sufficed so long as he had judged that every man could behave in one way or another, not recognising any obstacle. So long as he had not known how concealed and remote were the causes of evil. 'I deemed that you permitted it, as you did not declare yourself against it,' Hiel had cried. And he had cried the truth. Ab-Ram had been informed of Hiel's sin. He had neglected his duty to mete out justice, and so had tacitly acquiesced in the sin. In the eyes of the

people the malefactor was Hiel. But who was the evildoer in the eyes of the Lord?

Such thoughts were difficult for him; they were thoughts he had never known before, thoughts which, if he revealed them to others, would be incomprehensible to them. He could not endure the more and more persistent oppression of those eyes waiting on his words. They gazed at him as though at a judge, but he felt that he himself was under judgement. They awaited his verdict, but he waited for a sign from the Lord. He knew nothing. He was as helpless as a child. In his soul he repeated the harsh words of the law and did not know to whom to apply them. The pans of the scales hitherto so carefully levelled swung up and down. But the Lord was silent.

And, to the astonishment of the people gazing at the face of their chief, Ab-Ram sighed grievously and set his palms together as though imploring something. The dominating silence deepened still more, for they all held their breath.

Ab-Ram was thinking: 'I believe that my Lord watches and hears my request. So long as the sinner is alive the Lord can do with him as He wishes. If he dies his fate is sealed, for the dead do not rise again. I shall not condemn a man to death, for I know not what the Lord wills.'

He removed his hands from his face. He said: -

'Men of the tribe! These two are deserving of death. So the law declares. But I will be merciful to them, since the Lord on High has shown Himself merciful to us. They will be driven into exile. They shall not come nearer to the camp than two bowshots. What they do, I care not. Maybe the lion will devour them this very night, maybe he will spare them. God will do with them as He wishes and punish them as He desires. They shall not go together, lest they continue their monstrous deeds. The girl shall be driven out to the west, Hiel to the east. So shall ye do, men of the tribe.'

They all bowed low, in sign that they accepted the sentence. Lot gazed at his uncle with joyous appreciation, Hiel stammered expressions quivering with delight and gratitude. Exile was better than death. Anything was better than death, from which there was no return. Azubah did not understand what had happened. All she realised was that she was not to be burnt alive. She sobbed, her face buried in the grass.

When they had all dispersed, Hagar the Egyptian woman ran out from the tent. She raised the weeping girl, gave her to drink of some milk she

had brought in a pot, and thrust a piece of cake into her mouth. The girl gazed at her, only half conscious of what she was doing.

'I was afraid of him. . . . He beat me . . . ' she whispered.

Hagar returned to the tent, where old Noa gave her a look of dislike.

'She'll live a long time on what you gave her! She ought to have food for at least a week.'

'Prepare it and I will take it to her. She says he beat her.'

'Of course he beat her. . . . She would not lie with him out of pleasure.'

They both sighed over the woman's lot.

'What do you think, Nahor my son, of the sentence which your brother Ab-Ram passed on Hiel and his daughter Azubah? The law condemned them to death; but he was content with their exile. Harsh punishment indeed! The man will go off and join the Assyrian army, the girl will apply to the city to become a slave. I do not like to see living people burnt or drowned, and I would not go to watch such a spectacle. But the obedience which the tribe owes to Ab-Ram will not increase with such indulgence.'

'There be four things which are too wonderful for me: the way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the midst of the sea, and the way of a man's thought. Father, the way of Ab-Ram's thought is not known to me.'

'Of a truth, nor is it known to me. Apparently he praised Lot for exercising some restraint over his drovers?'

'Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out; even so, where there is no talebearer, the strife ceases.'

'The Broken Bowl

THE CITY OF HARRAN, THE MOST NORTHERLY POINT OF THE TRACK followed by the nomadic tribes, lay at the foot of white limestone hills which rose above the city in a serrated tracery. Down from these hills poured the rapid torrent Balik, which flowed into the Euphrates. Rich in water, it assured the fertility of the sub-alpine valley. The city itself, though smaller than Ur, seemed to the Hebrews very like the city they had left. True, natural rises took the place of artificial mounds; instead of a broad, navigable river there was a narrow stream; but the tower, the temple, and the castle were constructed in a similar style of architecture, as though they had been built by brothers of the builders at Ur. As in Ur, below the magnificent buildings were crowded the cone-shaped hutments of the poor. Though made not of clay but of stone, they had a similar opening at the top to let in the air, and the rains of the winter season. The Hebrews gazed at the city joyfully. They were wearied with wandering, with the heat of the summer, the inconveniences of the journey, and they longed to establish their camp permanently again, to turn the asses loose to graze, to pitch their tents, reinforcing the ropes properly with rings, and to spread their couches of sheepskins comfortably, not haphazardly for the night. They were delighted when they heard that Terah son of Nahor had decided to remain in the city of Haran all through the winter.

The camp was hurriedly pitched. The men sang as they erected the tents. The women clapped their hands, bustling about as though swirling in boiling water. The fresh mountain air was as intoxicating as wine. Sarai and her women worked busily, thirsting to arrange everything as it had been at Ur.

She was envious of her sister-in-law Milcah, because she was to live in the city. For Ab-Ram had leased a fine house, with a courtyard and

fountain, for his father and Nahor. Sarai had never lived in such a house, but she knew in advance that it was useless to mention the matter. Ab-Ram could not endure walls and cities. But the fortunate Milcah was already unpacking her bundles.

Only Edith was dissatisfied at the proposed stay in Harran. In her view, before the oncoming of winter they ought to have journeyed as far as Damascus, a city so beautiful that apparently the gods had quarrelled over the right to possess it. That city was wealthy, and full of life, spectacles, processions. . . . But Harran was only a quiet sub-alpine city. Edith shrugged her shoulders.

Ab-Ram also did not share the general delight, though for very different reasons from Edith's. He was afraid that in the spring his father would not want to journey further. Having exchanged the lower for the upper Euphrates, Ur for Harran, they would remain here for the rest of their days. And then what would become of his great intentions, of his obligation to proclaim the Truth, of the precious burden which Nergal-Sar had warned him against taking up, and for which Sep-Sin had died a horrible death? When departing from Ur he had thought that he would remove far from any priests. The floodgates of his heart would open, and every word of his would increase the adherents of the Lord. So far he had done nothing of all this, and he knew not when he would be able to do anything.

Wearied with the women's chatter, he went off to the city to see whether his father had all he needed. His footsteps drummed under the vaulted gateway. The city inhabitants gathered beneath it glanced at the stranger curiously, but without hostility. Harran lay on the road leading from Damascus to the fords of the Euphrates and the Tigris, and so, despite Edith's expectations, strangers were quite frequent visitors to the city. Truly, they never stayed for any length of time.

Old Terah was so delighted with his new house that Ab-Ram's face clouded. He was ashamed of his sorrow, for, as a moth a garment or rust iron, so sorrow eats away the soul of a man. It was worth enduring much in order to hear his father's happy laughter. Terah had himself unpacked his collections, which before the departure from Ur had been wrapped in felt, rushes, and soft fleeces, then sewn up in woven rushes, and left packed for nine months. Now he would let no one else touch them, but desired everybody to be present and share in his raptures. As the golden glitter of goblets and the sparkle of jewels increased, the old man enjoyed anew the

delights of possession. He set out his treasures on shelves, so that he could feast his eyes on them. Milcah, the slave-girl Bala, and Sur, whom Ab-Ram had given to Terah as personal servant, stared in astonishment, with wide-open eyes. Nahor and Ab-Ram, though indifferent to the beautiful, useless trifles, gazed with satisfaction at their father's radiant fate. Eliezer came in and, casting hardly a glance at the shelves, exclaimed:

'Live for ever, my lord! In Harran our old god Nannar-Sin reigns. I have been to the temple and heard the priests singing:

'Father Nannar, our Lord Anu, great ruler of the gods,
Father Nannar, our Lord Anu, great ruler of the gods.''

'Blessed be thy head, Eliezer!' Terah hurried set down the casket he was holding and, raising his right hand, began to intone in his cracked, aged voice:

'Father Nannar, Lord of Ur, great ruler of the gods;
Father Nannar, perfect one, most glorious ruler of the gods.'

Taking a breath to fill the hanging sack of his belly, Nahor hypocritically but unctuously joined in with his father. For they both remembered how, twenty-six years ago, the singing of this hymn had been punished with death, and the bricks bearing the image of the moon-god had been chiselled out of the walls of the temple of Ur, so that the image of the Babylonian Marduk might be set in its place. Without knowing it, they had arrived at a city in which the old god of their youth reigned as in past days. Without doubt he himself had brought them here, invisibly guiding them from his silver boat.

Unable to take part in the joyous chorus, Ab-Ram went out into the courtyard. The fountain was splashing as though deriding his affliction. 'Of a truth,' he thought, 'demons are making sport of me. Now they have found their god again, neither my father nor my brother will depart from this city.'

'Come here, my son Ab-Ram,' Terah called to him from the chamber. 'Come here. We must make a bountiful offering to the old god.'

'We have nothing to make bountiful offerings from, father,' Nahor made the practical observation.

'But we still have enough to be able to spare seven bullocks for the good old god. What are you looking so gloomy for, Ab-Ram? Is your god

jealous of bullocks for Nannar-Sin? Tell him not to be jealous. Nannar-Sin was esteemed by us before we knew your god. Rejoice with your father, my son. By the silver moon, I shall work again. I shall carve an image the priests of Harran finer than any I have made before. I shall make to a god sailing in his boat. I shall give it as a gift from the tribe. I'll just finish setting out these beautiful things of mine, and then we'll go together to the temple to make an obeisance to Nannar-Sin. . . . Careful, Milcah! That is the most valuable goblet of all. It comes from the island of Crete. Beautiful dancers, aren't they? Edith, your brother's wife, looked at it once, but she was only interested in the dresses. Oh! He suddenly cried out and sat down, or rather, dropped heavily on to a bench.

'What is the matter, father?' his two sons asked anxiously.

'Something has run into my foot. . . . There must have been a thorn in the wool. This rush matting is full of prickles. But no matter. It hurt a little, but it will pass in a moment. We'll go and make our obeisance to the old god. . . . How it burns . . . it burns . . .'

'Deign to show me your foot, my father. Perhaps a scorpion has bitten you?'

'It must be a thorn. . . . Yes, look; but first take this goblet, Ab-Ram, and set it up . . . up . . . there . . .'

Before Ab-Ram could reach out his hand the golden vessel fell from his father's grasp and rolled with a loud rattle over the pavement. The sound was accompanied by a rustle in the scattered rushes. Sur sprang across to see what was moving.

'Oh! A snake!' he whispered, turning pale.

A small grey snake made in swift zigzags towards the door.

Old Terah was lying on his couch, dying. In vain did his sons summon the priest-doctors, the priest-necromancers, the priests who could unbind spells. Casting greedy eyes on Terah's valuable possessions, which glittered on the shelves with a wealth worthy of a royal palace, they applied 'kupurru', rubbing the body in order to drive out the poison. As they did so they sang solemnly and incensed the couch seven times seven times. Quarters a yearling lamb, Ab-Ram and Nahor laid the steaming flesh on the sick man, and set beside him seven cakes hurriedly cooked in ashes. The priests who could unbind spells exclaimed: 'Let body go for body, blood for blood. May the gods graciously accept the substitution. Lay the heart at the head, the kidneys under the loins, the liver on the

belly, the brain on the brain. . . . O, gods, deign to receive head for head, shoulders for shoulders, backbone for backbone

Simultaneously the prognosticators by omens considered various auguries. Into a glass vessel they poured first ashes, then water; and when the water stood and the ashes fell to the bottom they threw a handful of pearls into the vessel. They augured from the sheep's liver, from the sick man's nose, ear, and excrement. All the omens were unpropitious, and Nahor quietly sent for the city's weeping women, for them to begin their lamentations as soon as the dying man's eyes closed.

Though his face was blue, and changed, Terah son of Nahor was still conscious. He convulsively clutched the teraphim in his hands, not letting them go despite the violent shuddering of his body. He clung to the guardians of the tribe like a drowning man to a boat. With his eyes he sought for Ab-Ram. His son bent over him in despair. If he could but pour his own healthy, masculine strength into the dying man! Woe! Woe! There is no greater unhappiness than the death of a father. A father's death is a torch going out in the darkness.

'I am afraid, son,' the sick man whispered, hardly moving his lips. 'I am afraid of your god. . . .'

Ab-Ram was not surprised to find that at his hour of death Terah son of Nahor was no longer thinking of the Nannar-Sin he had just been extolling, and he said as tenderly as he could:

'Fear not, father. He is just . . .'

'I am afraid of justice. I have not done a thing good.'

He shivered as he groaned, and Ab-Ram realised that justice can be harsh. His heart was torn at the sight of his dying father trembling before justice. O, if only the Lord, the Lord Most High, would mercifully pardon! But justice - he thought - knows no mercy.

'Your god is gracious to you. Ask him for me. . . .'

'I implore Him to let His justice flame forth over me, not over you,' Ab-Ram fiercely exclaimed.

'Your god is gracious to you,' Terah repeated in a sinking voice.

He closed his eyes and lay motionless. His fingers clutching the teraphim were the colour of a corpse. All the elders of the tribe had already been informed of the misfortune, and were crowded in the courtyard. The weeping women were waiting outside the door.

'My sons, Ab-Ram, Nahor!' the dying man suddenly called, opening his eyes.

'We are here, father,' they both replied.

'The men of the tribe . . . are they here?'

'We are,' they answered in chorus.

'Listen . . . to my . . . last words. Blessings be on your heads. May the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth be in your service, and an abundance of corn and wine. . . . My blessing on my son Ab-Ram. . . . Pay heed to him, for to him I pass the succession. . . . My son Nahor . . . Listen to thy brother. . . .'

'I will, father,' Nahor assured him fervently.

They knelt one on each side of the couch, joining hands over their father's breast, from which Ab-Ram had thrown off the sheep's carcass. The tribesmen standing in the courtyard knelt down and bowed their heads to the ground, in token that they would respect the dying man's will. Terah tried to say something more, but he was seized with a spasm. His eyes rolled, his lips foamed. The death-rattle sounded in his throat. Streaming with tears, Nahor signed to the weeping women to approach. Terah, son of Nahor, was dead.

The body was dipped into melted honey and oil, so that all its members might be soaked in the liquid. Then the arms and legs were folded and tied in the position of a child in its mother's womb, and the corpse was tightly swathed. The face was left uncovered, so that all the tribe might take farewell of its chief, giving him the kiss of peace. The men approached one after another in order of age and kinship, praising the virtues of the dead man, his intelligence and experience, before touching the face with their lips. They exalted him because he had been as wise as if he had lived a hundred years, or two hundred. The weeping women howled, rent their garments, shed their own tears over his head, and tore their hair. The tumult they raised drowned even the noise of the squealing pipes played by the pipers. The singers lamented:

'The silver cord is loosed, and the golden bowl is broken; the dust returns to the earth as it was.

'Woe, woe, to the line that is lacking in elders. . . . The gods are not gracious unto it. . . .

'The hoary head is a crown of glory; long life is a blessing.

'Broken is the golden vessel filled with a hundred years of wisdom.'

The last to take farewell of the dead Terah was his grandson Lot, son of Haran. He had known nothing of his grandfather's sudden illness and

death, for he had been away from the camp. The blessing had passed him by. He wept like a child as he bent over the rigid features.

When they had all passed, Terah's face was covered with a white linen kerchief, the entire body was wrapped in a shroud anointed with perfumes, and then in newly woven rush matting. Eliezer returned and informed Ab-Ram that the house had been purchased as he had commanded. It had cost two hundred silver shekels. Ab-Ram nodded without speaking. Several of the Hebrews had already dug a grave in one corner of the courtyard, for according to custom the body must be buried the same day, before sunset. The bottom and sides of the grave were lined with flagstones. Finally the folded body was laid in the grave and surrounded with all that might be of service to it in the land of shades. Negligent kinsmen had been known to put damaged articles and broken vessels into a grave, but Ab-Ram and Nahor desired that their father should take all that was most precious, and all the things in which he delighted. So they put at his head the golden goblet with the dancing women, a large onyx goblet, and a small goblet of white clay as hard as glass and as thin as an eggshell. The handsome stiletto with a handle carved in the shape of a goat clambering over a bunch of grapes formed of pearls was placed at his side. The utensils were filled with wine, honey, and milk; the bread of mourning, kneaded differently from everyday bread, rested on a valuable carved platter. Then all was covered with flagstones, and the grave was filled in with earth firmly tamped down. When the god Nannar-Sin sailed into the sky that evening he saw no trace of Terah, the energetic, lively old man whose anger was shortlived, and who had a great love of beauty and freedom. The morning sun had seen him living and happy, setting out his beloved treasures in his new house; but before sunset he had departed from this world. Such is the mortal human lot!

In the camp, several oxen were slaughtered to provide a banquet for the tribesmen; the women hurriedly baked the bread of mourning, which was then distributed. Terah's nearest kinsmen, Ab-Ram, Nahor, and Lot, did not take part in the funeral repast. They were bound to fast strictly for seven days. During this period they drank only water, and ate meagrely of bread. They sat motionless on ashes, in garments rent from top to bottom, with their shaven heads sprinkled with ashes, and with bare feet. They were silent. From time to time they cried out in unison: 'Alas, my father! Woe, woe! Thou hast departed from us, father. The delight of our eyes has gone out. Our joy is dead.'

The seven-day fast after a death was of great importance; even priests, who in general were freed from mourning, did not eat meat offerings during this period. When the fast was over, there still remained a penitential mourning, lasting thirty days. During all this time the kinsmen of the departed might not wash, cut their hair, tend their beards, mend their rent garments, have relations with a woman, or set wine to their lips: for wine is the symbol of joy.

Nabor and Lot found the fast difficult to endure, and so their sighs grew more and more mournful. But Ab-Ram was glad, for the enforced silence gave him ample time for thought. His thoughts were oppressive and involved. His sincere filial sorrow was linked with a vague feeling of guilt. Had he not been thinking angrily, only a moment before the misfortune came upon them: 'My father will never want to leave this city.' A hostile demon had caught up the son's thoughts, and the father would indeed remain. He would remain for ever.

Father was here, and now he is not. In the spring the tree will put forth green shoots and its twigs will blossom again. But the man who is dead will not rise again. His body will begin to stink almost before it is laid in the grave; it will swell and turn into dung, the dung will turn into dust. The soul of the man will go to the mournful place the Chaldeans call Aral, while the Hebrews call it Sheol. Both names have the one meaning: the abyss, the depths. There the souls of the departed sojourn like impotent larvæ, completely void of strength and feeling. From time to time, from age to age, the silence of the depths is disturbed by some echo of great events occurring in the world. Then the dead ask one another: 'Did you hear?' Their voice is as feeble as the rustle of leaves on a tree at a time of heat. So they remain, feeding on dust and ashes, waiting . . . for what? No one knows. Enduring, Why? That, too, no one knows.

Miserable is the existence spent in waiting beyond the grave. Who would long for such a state, who would aspire to it? Man was created for something different. Ab-Ram's memory revived pictures such as eye had never seen, sounds such as ear had never heard, things which he had descried without understanding, had surveyed without comprehending. The brilliance and the rainbow, immortality, clarity, the freedom of beings made in the image of God. . . What was left of all that? Misery and dung. . . Ab-Ram wept bitterly, not only over his dead father, but over himself, over all humanity. It seemed to him that the story of the world, which he had once seen in a vision, was one of the same penitential

mourning as his own, and Nahor's, and Lot's, sitting in sackcloth with ashes on their heads. Would this punishment never be ended? Would man, once so noble a creature, always be born in order to die?

On the thirtieth day of mourning Nahor said:

'My brother Ab-Ram, I ask you, as head of the tribe, what you intend to do now.'

'It is the rainy season,' Ab-Ram answered. 'The rain is drumming on the roofs. I and my people shall pass the rainy season in Harran, but I have come to dislike the city which robbed us of our father, and I shall journey as before to seek a suitable spot in which I can glorify the true Lord.'

'So I expected,' Nahor said. 'Grind a madman between grindstones, you will not separate the madness from him. I have a request to make of you, brother.'

'Make our request, my brother Nahor.'

'You are head of the tribe. Permit me to remain here. I am afraid of further wandering. The gods have granted me a little strength, I feel better here than I did while journeying. My legs no longer bend beneath me like the leaves of the sweet-flag. I am afraid of losing my newly recovered strength. Allow me to remain, Ab-Ram. Your god commands you. Do as he desires. I do not know your god. I am satisfied with our old god Nannar-Sin. This valley is fertile, the pasturage abundant, water is plentiful, the people seem to be well-disposed. We have this house which you bought so that our father's body might lie in its own soil. I will remain here and watch over our father's grave.'

'Let it be as you desire, Nahor.'

'May Ab-Ram be blessed! The gods have given you understanding. You are wise; you are good. I thank you.'

'Son of Haran, I expect you, too, desire to remain here,' Ab-Ram turned to Lot.

His nephew reddened, disconcerted by the question.

'I know not, Uncle Ab-Ram... I would rather go with you... Truly, I know not... I will come and say immediately.'

'Go then and ask your woman what she desires.'

Ashamed, burning to the ears, Lot went out. Nahor gave his brother an imploring look:

'I have not yet said all. I have another request to make of you, Ab-Ram.'

'Reveal it. I suppose you are concerned about the division of the cattle

and the possessions? Take of the herds and of all the goods as much as you wish.'

'I thank you again. You guard me against want, good brother. A forest ass is a prey for the lion, a poor man is the pasturage of the rich. . . . But I was not thinking of cattle. The wisdom of man is known by his patience. Have patience to hear my speech to the end. Will you take the teraphim with you, Ab-Ram?'

'The teraphim?' Ab-Ram repeated slowly. He had not thought of this question until now.

'They belong to you as head of the tribe. It is your right to take them. But you have your god. Perhaps you are no longer concerned with the teraphim? If you are not, then give them to me. You will be doing me a great kindness. . . . It is fearful for me to be left without the teraphim, and surely you do not need them?'

'Give me time to think over what you have said, brother Nahor.'

They were both silent. Ab-Ram sat on the ground, wrapped in his cloak. Nahor gazed at him anxiously. That gaze was oppressive to Ab-Ram, so he threw the edge of his cloak over his head. In the closeness of his own breath, entirely cut off from his surroundings, he thought. He felt that he ought to say: 'Take, brother Nahor, our father's teraphim. You judge rightly that I do not need them, since I confess another God infinitely more powerful than they.' So he should say, but the words would not come to his lips, and he himself was alarmed at this inward opposition. He realised that he must give an answer not only to his brother but to himself, and that the question being set him really was: 'Do you believe in God, Ab-Ram? In the God who called thee and led thee safely out from Ur? If so, what do the teraphim mean to you? What man lights his way with a rushlight in the sun? Give them to your brother as quickly as you may.'

'But if you do not believe, then forget all about the Lord, forget what old Nergal-Sar revealed to you, and what Sep-Sin perished for. Bow down with others to the god Shamash, the god Nannar-Sin, the goddess Ishtar, the goddess Dargkin., the gods Marduk, Ea, Anu, En Lih. Make them sacrifices, enrich the greedy priests, wear spells against demons, and keep the teraphim. Well?'

He gazed numbly at the white woven material barring him off from the world. Meanwhile, outside the rain had stopped, the wind had driven away the clouds, and the sun was shining. Ab-Ram gazed at it numbly

through the camel-hair. It seemed crimson, as though it were setting. A pale red disc. Around it the gloom continued. So long as he could remember he had been fond of the teraphim. The clumsy stone images, that looked as though they had been washed by a stream, personified the line, his fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers. How many generations before and after the Flood had died holding them in their hands, just as his father Terah had? How hard it was to part with all one's past. Must he necessarily choose? Either the Lord, or the teraphim? Could he not keep them both?

'No, you cannot. Enough of this procrastination, Ab-Ram. One may set no one else as equal beside the Lord. Do you believe?'

'I believe . . .'

He flung off his cloak; his brow was beaded with sweat.

'I will give you our father's teraphim, brother Nahor. They are yours.'

Nahor all but choked with joy

'Such words are a golden apple in a silver leaf.' He could not believe his fortune. He tenderly took up both the images and pressed them to his chest.

'One thing I ask you, Nahor. Until I have departed from Harran, tell no one that I have given them to you. Neither your wife, nor any of the servants.'

'I shall tell no one, my brother, Ab-Ram.'

'So you will not be remaining here?' Milcah asked her sister-in-law.

Edith, as elegant as usual and glittering with ornaments, shook her head.

'Lot, my husband, has decided to go with Ab-Ram,' she said artfully. 'I am glad of that, for I do not like Harran at all. It is all one to live in such a city or in a tent.'

'I like it here,' Milcah admitted, 'but I don't like staying here alone with Nahor. What am I to do if he dies? He has been rather better of late, but he is always complaining that he is very weak. What shall I do? Roena is bad, Tabeh disobedient, Bala is stupid. Ab-Ram is our goel, but he will go far away and will not know anything at all of what has happened to us.'

She sighed and said no more, for Edith's face clearly revealed that she was quite unconcerned.

'Nahor has told me,' Milcah began again after a moment, 'that you

will wander along the shore of the Great Sea. Your father, O wife of my brother, comes from the coastal city called Surri, so I have been told. Perhaps you will see that city and your kinsmen?

'It is true,' Edith proudly confirmed, 'that my father's line comes from the city of Surri, a city as great as Babylon, and so wealthy that it is known to all the world as the mart of the nations. My father was a great merchant. He had a hundred slaves who day and night brought up from the sea-bottom the shellfish used in the making of purple. Yet even if Ab-Ram son of Terah should drive his herds under the gates of that city, I shall not see my father's city, nor shall I seek out my kinsmen. . . .'

'Why not?' Milcah asked in astonishment.

The copper-haired woman's features went hard.

'I would be ashamed to enter the city of Surri as the wife of a herdman stinking of goats. . . .'

'You red-haired lizard! A herdman is of more value than a merchant!'

'To a heifer or a sheep, but not to me.'

Sarai anointed all her body with perfumed oils, for she was expecting that Ab-Ram would summon her as in the past to the common couch. The time of mourning was over. But he did not do so, and the sharp, pungent scent of myrrh vainly filled the women's part of the tent. Hagar smiled derisively. In her anger Sarai was near to tears.

Knowing nothing of this, absorbed in his own cares, Ab-Ram tossed sleeplessly on his couch. He felt depressed and unhappy. He was disgusted with himself for having asked Nahor not to reveal that he had given him the teraphim. Was it that he feared the discontent of the tribe more than the anger of the Lord? Instead of concealing his deed, he should have profited by the opportunity to proclaim publicly the glory of the Lord of Hosts, his confidence in Him, and his faith. . . . He had not done so, for he was a coward, unworthy of the favour he had been shown. And so the Lord had departed from him. Now Ab-Ram was alone. He had abandoned the guardian tribal gods, and had offended the Lord.

Half asleep, half awake, he thought he was standing on the very edge of an abyss, on a cliff washed from below with water, and ready to crumble at any moment. He wanted to cry out with alarm, but could not utter a sound. He remembered that once, in a similar despair, he had stretched out his hand in the darkness and the Lord had taken his hand, had led him out in safety. Today He would no longer do so, for He was

justly angered. Then again it seemed to him that he was his own father Terah, that he was dying, and convulsively clutching the teraphim to his chest. But both the images slipped from his hands, and were lost.

He lay in his torment a long time, but at last he fell asleep. He was awakened by a call:

'Ab-Ram! Ab-Ram!'

'Here am I!' he answered, half awake, rubbing his eyes. He did not know who had called him, or what he had been called for. Had a lion attacked the herd?

'Here am I!' he repeated. But there was no one. The rushlight was burning evenly. He must have dreamed it, he thought, as he tried to get off to sleep again.

'Ab-Ram! Ab-Ram!'

Now he started up, fully awake. He listened. Perhaps he had been visited by the spirit of his father? But the dead have no voice, and besides, Terah son of Nahor had in the grave all that he needed.

'Ab-Ram! Ab-Ram!'

The voice sounded more and more powerfully, until it was roaring, yet all around was a silence so profound that all the world seemed to be hushed in expectation. His hair stood on end like a brush. Now he realised Whose was the voice.

'Blessed art thou, Ab-Ram. . . I will bless them that bless thee and curse him that curseth thee, and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. .

of hills lying to the west. At times he halted and sniffed, stretching out his neck as though striving to descry something. Ab-Ram and Lot walked behind him silently. The drovers drove the cattle and flocks after them, though the beasts lay down in the dry channel and did not want to move.

Igal walked more and more briskly; he stretched out his hands as though the staff were straining towards something in the distance.

'We're going uphill,' Lot anxiously remarked. 'There will be no water on the hill.'

'Quiet. . . There may be a spring among the rocks.'

The plain they were moving across was withered. The early spring month of Sivan, which customarily covers the earth with green, was barely half over; what would happen in the summer, seeing that the grass was already yellow, and the streams empty? The previous year's autumn rains had failed. In vain were sacrifices offered up in all the cities. With the aid of auguries the priests of Chaldea, Babylon, Assyria, and Canaan had sought for the criminals who through their unpunished crimes had provoked the anger of the gods. Many people thus indicated by the auguries (and out of favour with the priests) had perished, yet the drought continued. The spring rains had been awaited with longing, but they had been insufficient and over violent. The earth was as dry as a rock; streams of water had flowed over the surface or had channelled out gulleys without soaking into the soil. And then, through all the lands that surround the desert in a half moon, and through the land already known as Negeb or Dry Land, passed a shudder of alarm, the spectre of hunger, of thirst.

'Uncle Ab-Ram!' Lot muttered. 'Uncle Ab-Ram! The dogs!'

Several tawny camp mongrels that dragged persistently behind the caravan were running past them, tearing ahead towards a wall of vegetation that showed dark on the rise.

'They have scented water,' Ab-Ram muttered back with relief.

They were going uphill, yet old Igal hastened along so hurriedly that those supporting him could barely keep pace. At last he halted outside an ancient stock enclosure walled with rocks. Ab-Ram ran his eyes over the interior with a look of disillusionment: he could see no well here. As they entered they were greeted with whining, baying, and snarling. The dogs were fighting a pack of jackals, which evidently regarded the enclosure as their territory. While some fought the dogs, others leaped desperately at the wall, trying to escape.

'There must be water here somewhere, there are so many of them.'

Blind Igal ran across almost to the opposite wall of the enclosure. A heap of brushwood and thorns flung down in one corner was covered with a dry roof of last-year grass. A thick layer of dust had turned it into an impenetrable crust. Through that crust their senses were struck by the fresh feel of water. A cistern! The dogs were already lapping eagerly, and they snarled when the men tried to drive them off.

The cistern was deep; without doubt it had been bored centuries ago. No one had visited it for a long time; the last-year water was still there, protected from evaporation by the covering. Only now did the blind man feel tired, and he lay down on the grass. Ab-Ram gave orders for the men to range themselves round the cistern so that the cattle should not stampede to get to it, trampling one another and spoiling the water. It was drawn up in skin bags and poured into the stone troughs set along the walls of the enclosure. It was not easy to establish some order in watering the animals and then distributing water to the human beings, but at last all had drunk their fill. The water was very stale, but no one took any notice, for they were all suffering from thirst. The watered flocks and herds lay down, packed close together in the enclosure. Only then were the camels watered. Meanwhile, dusk fell. By the last gleams of daylight brushwood and prickly branches were hurriedly cut down to form a barrier at the entrance. A fire was lighted in the middle of the enclosure, for though the day had been hot the night promised to be chilly. Ab-Ram went to arouse Igal and lead him to the fire.

'You possess a great gift,' he said to the old man, in a tone of deep respect.

'The gods have taken my eyes from me, but they have allowed me to see water,' the blind man laughed.

'Igal, do you see any new cistern or well on our further journey?'

The old man paused for thought.

'I know not, Ab-Ram. I must go far away from this water before I can scent other water. I counsel you to remain here a few days so that the animals can rest, and when we depart, to fill all the skins you possess with water.'

There was no room to pitch the tents in the enclosure, so everybody lay on the ground, covered with their cloaks. The women separate, the men separate; the children with the women. Except for the guards posted at the entrance, they all fell asleep as soon as they lay down. It was not for

them to be anxious about what would follow. It was for the head of the tribe to provide them with water tomorrow and^e after, just as he had provided it today.

'The task of the head of the tribe . . .' Ab-Ram could not sleep, he was tormented with anxiety. 'Whither should he lead the tribe which had been entrusted to him? What was he really seeking? He had wandered into a country dried up, waterless, perhaps simply in order to bring them all to disaster. For a long time now Ab-Ram had been feeling like a man who had lost his road and had swerved from the object of his journey. Until the departure from Harraṇ everything had been intelligible. He had gone out from the city of the moon-god beloved of his people, to search for a suitable spot in which to proclaim the glory of the True God. So he himself had said to Nahor. That was why he had gone southward. He had passed by enchanting Damascus, lost in fountains, washed with streams flowing down from the everlasting snows of Mount Hermon; past the pleasant Lake of Galilee glittering like a turquoise amid a fertile humid region; past the beautiful valley of Esdrelon, like a strong ass lying in a stall; past the river Jordan, flowing with water muddy and yellow from fertile slime; past banks abundantly overgrown with trees. . . . He had passed all these places hurriedly, shortening the halts, as though pursued or himself pursuing. What did he want? Among the lands he had traversed were there so few spots both free and fertile, well watered, where he could halt and begin the work to which he felt called? Had he not rather fled before the burden that was falling on his shoulders? As he approached every hill, had he not expected that beyond it he would meet someone who would take up that work for him?

An unexpected hum of talk broke into his bitter meditations. Beyond the thorn barrier a strange voice shouted: 'In the name of the gods of this country, let me in.'

'We have axes in our hands and selected bows,' Eliezer's voice replied.

Ab-Ram started to his feet and ran to the entrance. An unknown caravan was endeavouring to force its way inside the enclosure.

'Your feet will not enter here,' he shouted. 'There is not room even for a single ass. Depart!'

'Who is it that speaks thus?'

'Ab-Ram son of Terah, head of the tribe of the sons of Eber. And who are you?'

'I am Sarug son of Ephraim, a merchant of Byblos, a poor merchant

who has been robbed by thieves. I have one or two men with me and one or two asses. Let your servant enter, my lord. I am afraid of the lions, and my beasts and men are very thirsty. Is there still water in the cistern?

'How do you know about the cistern?'

'I halted here last year. By the god whom you confess, let me in.'

Ab-Ram looked about him. Though the enclosure was filled with people and animals, with good will it could accommodate a few more.

'Remove the brushwood,' he ordered, 'and throw it on the fire.'

The dry grasses burst into flame. By its light Sarug son of Ephraim rode in; he was a corpulent, healthy-looking man, quite well attired. Behind him his servants led in not one or two but twelve asses loaded with sacks of goods.

'Merchant of Byblos,' Ab-Ram angrily exclaimed, 'you said you had been robbed and had only one or two asses.'

'I do not see any axes and selected bows in your hands,' the merchant replied affably, not in the least discountenanced.

'Why do your sacks stink so?'

'It is the natural scent of my goods.'

The Hebrews and their animals jostled and pressed together. The merchant's load occupied almost as much space as his asses. Ab-Ram regretted that he had let in the uninvited guest; but how could he have left him without water?

Next morning he learned that the stinking sacks contained a substance called hemar (which the Greeks of the future were to call asphalt, and other nations bitumen, or earth-pitch). The dark brown, porous blocks came from the Salt Lake. Sarug son of Ephraim was carrying it to Egypt, where it was highly valued.

'Egypt, or, as you call it, Musraim,' the merchant explained to Ab-Ram 'has either wood nor pitch. Only gold and wheat grow in abundance there. And they need large quantities of pitch for caulking their boats and embalming their dead. The poorest of the dead,' he added; 'for the bodies of the wealthy are embalmed in cedar resin brought from the mountains of Lebanon. I prefer to trade in cheaper goods, which have a readier sale. I travel to Egypt every year.'

'You carry a convenient commodity - no tidbit for thieves.'

'I carry not only pitch,' Sarug protested energetically. 'On two asses I am carrying Balm of Gilead, the gum called Adragant, and a very valuable oil of ladanum.'

'I know ladanum. I had several barrels of it at one time.'

'A great, a truly great possession! Whom did you sell it to?'

'I left it behind in the city of Ur from which I come.'

'You left it behind? Ye gods! In addition to oils and gum I also carry fine silks and jewels. I will readily show them to you without hope of profit, for I know who buys what . . .'

'I have no need of jewels,' Ab-Ram admitted in an indifferent tone. 'If my father Terah son of Nahor were still among the living he would be very interested in them. He esteemed masterly workmanship.'

'Terah son of Nahor of the city of Ur?' the merchant exclaimed. 'I knew him. He bought golden vessels made in the island of Crete from me, five or six years ago. . . . He is dead? By the gods! He seemed so hale, so cheerful.'

'A snake bit him and cut short his days. The vessels you speak of I laid in his grave, for he loved them.'

The merchant could not hide his astonishment:

'You did honour to your father as if he were a prince.'

Ab-Ram looked up abruptly, caught by a recollection.

'My father gave you a slave in exchange for those vessels, did he not?'

'Yes. I accepted such a low payment in order to gratify your father.'

'It is your servant's opinion that the payment was excessive; but no more of that. The slave was called Shamur, if I remember? Sarug son of Ephraim, can you sell Shamur back to me?'

'The ungracious gods did not warn me beforehand of your desire. I sold the slave Shamur some years ago to Sydonese mariners. I am a merchant, and I trade in everything that can be traded. Including slaves.'

Ab-Ram was silent, afflicted. The merchant tried to dispel his ill humour.

'If the Sydonese mariners return safely from their voyage to the farther end of the Great Sea - and your servant will know where to look for you - I will inform you so that you may buy back the man you desire. Meanwhile, have a look at my silks. They will rejoice your eyes and those of your kinsmen.'

'There is no time,' Ab-Ram replied.

'I do not insist that you look today. We shall find a convenient time as we journey together to Egypt.'

'But I am not journeying to Egypt.'

'Whither, then?'

Whither? Ab-Ram did not answer. For he himself, this erring, lost wanderer, the negligent steward of a great Cause, did not know whither he was going.

'There is only one road you can take, and that leads to Egypt,' the merchant declared. 'You cannot return the way you have come, for if you do you will perish. Within a month you will not find one drop of water in any cistern or in any torrent. Wells are more rare in this country than a righteous man among judges. Rain will not fall before the month of Tishri, and by then the sun will have devoured everything. Profoundly by the fact that you are the earliest of the travellers; ere long this road will be thronged, for everybody will be fleeing into Egypt before the anger of the gods.'

'I have never been to Egypt, I do not know the way. Is it far?'

'Tomorrow will see the new moon. If you hasten you may see the next new moon in Egypt. The sea will show you the road, and in any case we shall travel together. A good transaction, son of Terah: I will guide you, and you will protect me against thieves.'

'But will they take us into subjection there? I departed from Chaldea when Hammurabi son of Sin-Muballit planned to number us and impose a tax.'

Sarug laughed aloud:

'I know Babylon and the son of Sin-Muballit. I have ceased to journey with commodities to Babylon since the tax that was extracted from me swallowed up all my profits. Hammurabi is an avaricious dog. Other merchants still journey to Babylon, but they pretend to the inspectors that they have been robbed in the desert and so have no income. . . . That is a slippery and dangerous trick, I prefer not to try it. The world does not end at Babylon.'

'So it is not customary to number the people in Egypt?'

Sarug laughed again.

'They have numbered all their subjects several thousand years ago, and they repeat the numbering of people and cattle every hundred years. I would not be surprised if they have numbered the crocodiles in the rivers and the frogs in the marshes. There are more kings' officials in Egypt than fellaheen, and as many scribes as there are reeds by the rivers. . . . Where two men are at work, a third, an overseer, sits with a whip over his shoulder, and they are at work, a third, an overseer, sits with a whip over his shoulder, and they are at work. . . .'

'Not for anything will I go to Egypt!' Ab-Ram exclaimed.

'Am I trying to persuade you to spend all your life there? When we have passed the Bitter Lakes we shall enter the Egyptian district known as Goshen. The desert tribes often take refuge there before drought, and they are allowed to dwell in the land of Goshen for a whole year without paying taxes or being compelled to work. It is a land fertile beyond belief. In the north there are forests of palm trees which bear thick and luscious dates. Water from the Nile, the Father of Rivers, runs through canals into every part. There is a remarkable abundance of grass.'

'Your servant finds it strange that such fertile land is lent to unknown tribes, and nothing is demanded in return.'

'The Egyptians have their reasons,' Sarug declared. 'The land of Goshen borders on the desert. Out of the desert descend rogues and thieves who steal the herds. The fellaheen are reluctant to do anything to defend themselves, but the tribes accepted as guests fight efficiently, defending their own possessions. At times they have even driven the robbers afar off, and there has been peace for a long period. Before the Egyptians do any good deed they always consider whether it will pay them.'

'You tempt me, Sarug, and the withered grass all round us compels me to pay heed to you. Yet listen to me: We are a free people, valuing our liberty above gold. No king of the earth has any right over us. Answer sincerely: if I enter into Egypt, where, as you say, before long even the frogs and crocodiles will be numbered, to whom must I make my obeisance and declare my fidelity? Forgive my words, the words of a simple man. We are fond of our freedom.'

'The king of Egypt, who is called Pharaoh - which means the great dual line - you will not see at all, for he dwells in the southern part of the country, and strangers have no access to him. He is regarded as a god. Which, for that matter, is a common habit with kings. They who govern the world are gods, different from the gods only in this, that they die. You will see and make your obeisance to the nomarch or royal governor; for the country is divided into nomes, and each nome is governed by a nomarch. The land of Goshen is within the nome of Suphtia, and the nomarch has his seat in the city of Gesem (from which Goshen gets its name). When you make your obeisance, you will say: "I have been driven here by drought. I have nothing wherewith to feed my cattle. You have herds of cattle, allow me to make use of them until my land turns green again." To which he will answer: "Graze your herds in peace."'

'Is that all?'

'Yes. I journey there every year, so I know. When next spring the coppers again fall on these lands, you will go to the nomarch and say: "May our gods reward thy days for the hospitality thou hast shown unto me. I depart to my country so that everywhere I may proclaim the greatness of Pharaoh." And then you will depart.'

'But how shall I say all this to him, when I know not the Egyptian speech?'

'You are over-cautious, Ab-Ram son of Terah. Know you not that the Babylonian speech is known all over the world? The kings correspond in that speech, and every Egyptian official will understand what you say.'

Ab-Ram thought it over, for he was not the man to take precipitate decisions. Whatever Sarug son of Ephraim might say, he realised that if he went to Egypt he would be setting his neck in a yoke. That which he had not been able to begin in the free expanses that belonged to no man, he would be all the less able to achieve in a country ordered, divided, and filled with royal officials. Then why should he go there? Ah, if he were only alone! But he was not alone. He was the head of the tribe. His first and most important duty was to safeguard his fellow tribesmen against hunger and want. He could still hear the women's lamentations, the weeping of the children thirsting for water. What would he have done today if Igal had not discovered the cistern? And what would happen within a week, a month, or two months? Who was responsible for the tribe coming to this spot? He. Ab-Ram, and no other. It was only just that now he should bear the punishment.

'I will do as you counsel, Sarug,' he said aloud. 'I will lead my tribe to Egypt.'

'When a sheep was asked whither it preferred to go: to the slaughterer or the grass, it answered: "to the grass." And so with you, Ab-Ram.'

The merchant laughed aloud at his jest, but Ab-Ram's face remained overcast.

Edith, Lot's wife, quickly found a means of making the merchant's acquaintance, and even of becoming to some extent friendly with him. It was true that he did not come from the city of Surri, he did not know her father who was engaged in the manufacture of purple; but he represented that same lost, wealthy world, animated, fond of amusement, for which she persistently yearned. In order to please her, though Ab-Ram still evinced no desire to look at the merchant's silks, Sarug son of Ephraim

Am to open his bales and to show everything he had with him. This gave greatly excited all the women in the community. They all, not excluding old Noa, abandoned the pots to crowd round the merchant, who slowly, with unctuous solemnity, untied the bales. Inside the outer sacks of pitched canvas were other, leather bags; in the leather bags were yet others, of linen, and within these there were smaller bundles wrapped in canvas as tightly as an infant is swaddled. Slowly, deliberately, Sarug unrolled the first wrapping, the second, the third, the fourth. . . . When the women's tension was strained to the utmost he swiftly removed the last wrapping and, with a broad sweep of the arm, unrolled the rustling, iridescent piece of coloured silk. Before they could take it in with their eyes he threw over it a second, blue piece, a third, golden piece, a fourth the colour of violets, a fifth as green as grass after rain. The rainbow of colours fell over the wrappings, gleaming and glistening in the sunlight. Rapture robbed not only the women of their tongues. The men staring over their wives' shoulders were also struck dumb.

Satisfied with the impression he had made, Sarug did not spare his efforts. He tore off the wrappings and threw down more and more pieces of beautiful silk. Finally he set his finger to his lips, to call for special attention. He spread out an azure silk, striped with rather darker blue stripes, and sprinkled with small white and golden circles. In the centre of each circle was a purple seal like a heart. The sight of this design, like a field of white and golden flowers over the azure of the sky, dazzled the eye.

Edith turned pale with desire, Sarai went crimson. Her eyes burned with such fervent longing that Ab-Ram, smiling indulgently, asked Sarug the price of that piece. But the merchant's reply exceeded his worst expectations, and his smile gave place to a look of shocked astonishment.

'Only a king could buy that for his woman,' he declared.

'You have said the truth, Ab-Ram. It is a regal price, for it is a regal silk. The women of the Egyptian court will buy it from me without hesitation.'

Sarug son of Ephraim was a garrulous fellow, and as he rode at Ab-Ram's side he talked continually about the countries and cities he had visited, and the customs of the people among whom he had travelled with his commodities. He told about the land situated at the very end of the Great Sea, where silver is so plentiful that it is treated like sand. 'Our people sail there and load so much silver on board that the vessels sink in

the water to their gunwales, they leave behind all their iron, or copper, or bronze, and cast silver anchors and hooks. I myself have seen our vessels returning with anchors and chains of silver.'

Ab-Ram listened inattentively, but regretting that he did not have his father, Terah son of Nahor, with him, for he had been as inquisitive as a child concerning everything that was new, distant, and unknown. He himself listened closely only to anything Sarug said about Egypt, the country towards which he was journeying against his own inclinations.

'There is as much gold in Egypt as there is silver in that western country, or even more,' Sarug continued. 'In the south they have mines where the slaves gather gold out of the rocks. Thence it is floated in vessels down the Nile to the cities. The Egyptians have a very large and well-trained army. The Egyptian archers are famous all over the world. Their arrows are long, and so strong that they penetrate armour; and they never miss their target. Each army has its own name. The first royal army is known as "Satiated with Victories", the second as "Infallible Bows", the third as "Mighty in Battle". It is a great country, a wise country, a wealthy state. Truly I think there are too many scribes and officials in Egypt, and too heavy burdens are laid on the fellaheen. Every fellah dreams of his son becoming a scribe, and on the other hand field labour is regarded as the worst and most oppressive of tasks. Anyone who can escapes from it. . . . There was even a revolt at one time. . . . O, gods, restrain the unruly tongue of the son of Ephraim. Verily I must be mistaken, Ab-Ram. How can such matters concern an honest merchant? What can an honest merchant know of such matters? The field labourers do not buy my goods. The officials do, praise be to the officials. The country is very pious, and diligently observes the law. Pharaoh himself cannot do anything that is not in accordance with the will of the gods.'

'How does he know the will of the gods?'

Sarug son of Ephraim screwed up his eyes significantly.

'What are the priests for?' he asked. 'Every day the high priest sends Pharaoh the commands of the god Amon. Do not do this. . . . do that. . . '

'Does Pharaoh always listen to him?'

'He must. Have you, Ab-Ram, journeyed in any country where the priests did not govern? The Egyptians especially are skilled in magic. A man who saw it happen with his own eyes told me that once in the presence of Pharaoh the high priest cut off the head of a goose and threw the carcass far away. Then he pronounced an incantation, the head ran to the

severe. . . the goose was re-united, and it got up and walked. . . Who would dare to oppose the priests?

'What gods are held in reverence in Egypt?'

'They have so many gods that only the priest or the scribe can name them all. Your servant remembers only that there is a god with the head of a jackal or wolf, a god with the head of an ibis, and the goddess Hathor, who has the form of a milch cow. In honour of this goddess foul and obscene rites are performed once a year. . . They also revere animals: crocodiles, cats, and bulls. They embalm them like human beings and set up tombs for them. . .'

'Strange things you have to tell, Sarug.'

'I swear by all the gods, Babylonian, Assyrian, Canaanite, and Egyptian, that what I say is true. You will see for yourself. Would I tell you legends, knowing that before long you would learn that I am a liar?'

'I did not say that you lie; only I think it strange that people should worship unintelligent animals. . . But you have called on all the gods of the earth. Tell me, Sarug, in which of them do you yourself believe?'

'I?' Sarug was astonished. 'I believe in the gods of the country in which I happen to be. Why do you ask me? It is the duty of a good merchant to adapt himself to the faith of his clients. When trading with Egyptians am I to say: "Great are the gods of Babylon! You have none greater than they!"? Not I!'

'I desired to know in which god you really believed, when at night you are troubled within your own heart.'

'Your servant is never troubled, especially at night,' Sarug assured him, glancing at his companion in growing astonishment. 'The gods bless me with health, and a merchant's turnovers are profitable.'

'Do you never desire to know which god it is that endows you with health?'

'No.'

'Now which god governs the world and reigns over life and death?'

'Again no. I know that every man will die and every tree will rot. I expect that so far as I am concerned that will not soon happen.' He slapped himself contentedly on his belly. They were both silent, for neither was able to understand the other's thoughts.

They rode on for a long time side by side without speaking. At last Ab-Ram asked:

'From what you have said, Sarug, I gather that the priests have great authority in Egypt.'

'Very great; but they would have still greater authority if it were not for the women, who govern in their own fashion. . . .'

This time Ab-Ram's amazement was so sincere and violent that he flung one leg over his ass's head, to sit sideways and face Sarug.

'You are jesting with your servant, Sarug son of Ephraim. How is it possible for women to govern, when they are created in order to bear and obey?'

'That is so among you in Chaldea. In Egypt it is different. The women have equal rights with the men, or even greater rights. . . . I am not joking in the least, Ab-Ram son of Terah. There are times when the rights of the women are greater than those of men. The women have a voice in everything. They are beautiful and bold. They are immodest and lustful. The men submit to them, even the priests. . . . I have heard an amusing story about a Pharaoh who went blind. He made sacrifices to Amon in order to recover his sight, but the god said: "I will take the veil from thine eyes if thou wilt bring me one faithful wife to be found in thy country." At that the Pharaoh began to weep, for he realised that he would be blind for the rest of his life. There is another amusing story about the beautiful and lascivious Nitobah, who went on assaulting her husband's brother until, fearing the vengeance of his elder brother, the man cut off his genitals in sight of the woman and threw them to the crocodiles.'

Ab-Ram listened with growing disapproval.

'Sarug son of Ephraim,' he said, 'you have said that you may not affront your clients by praising other gods in their presence; but are you not afraid to tell me, a stranger, things which are secret and very insulting to that nation?'

Sarug burst into laughter.

'The stories I have told you, Ab-Ram, are repeated openly in Egypt. Anyone who can read can find them inscribed on papyrus. Such things and worse are told aloud in conversation even in the royal court. The Egyptians are hot-blooded and readily yield to temptation. But as they greatly respect the law they get round it in ingenious fashion. The law says that any man who robs a man of his wife is to be punished with death. So do you know what the lascivious man who covets another man's wife does? He kills the husband secretly or openly and takes the wife, for to take a widow to oneself is a praiseworthy act. And thus his

lust is satisfied and the gods are not affronted. Without doubt they would suffer much disease with their profligacy, but every^o boy is circumcised in infancy. . . .’

‘Your servant does not understand what you are saying,’ Ab-Ram interrupted.

The merchant explained what he meant, and Ab-Ram was even more astonished.

‘They say,’ Sarug ended, ‘that it is healthier and cleaner so. Diseases do not lay hold on one and fertility is increased. They observe this custom strictly. They even call the uncircumcised man *amu*, unclean. . . . And they drink a very strong beer made from dates, but most of all a beer they call *syceŕa*. They brew it from ripe barley with bitter lupin and scented herbs. They are very fond of it. I don’t like it, it is too heavy for me. . . .’

2

Left to His Own Devices

THIS IS MY NATIVE LAND! MY NATIVE LAND!' HAGAR, SARAI'S USUALLY taciturn bondswoman, exclaimed excitedly. She clutched at the arm of Ketura, who was walking beside her. 'Look! My father had a slave who drew up water like that.' She pointed to the pole called *shaduf*, which rose along the edge of a canal, and served for drawing up water to pour into the trenches which irrigated the fields. Each of the *shadufs* consisted of a long pole set upright in the ground, with a transverse pole fastened near its upper end; this crosspole swung by its centre on the upright pole, and had a wooden bucket or vessel of bark at one end, and a rope hanging from the other. Dark-featured, clean-shaven men, completely naked except for a narrow loincloth, were engaged in releasing the ropes so that the buckets dipped into the canal, then drawing them up again by hauling on the ropes, swinging the poles round, and letting the water pour out of the buckets into the trenches. Then they turned the crosspoles back, lowered the buckets, filled them, raised them, turned the poles, released the buckets, turned, lowered, filled . . . and so on without end, without a moment's respite. All along the canal the people were singing a song as monotonous and unending as their labour, keeping time with their movements. Streaming with sweat, they barely turned their heads to look at the Hebrew caravan as it passed.

Sarug son of Ephraim had not deviated from the truth in praising the wealth of this land. After the torments of the drought, Ab-Ram's people looked with voracious delight at the lush green meadows, the palm groves and fig groves, all loaded with still unripe fruit. The wheat was thick and white, ready for harvesting. Only the homes of the inhabitants of this wealthy land seemed to be more wretched than any the Hebrews had seen before. For they consisted not even of the familiar conical mud huts with

an opening at the top, but of sheds roughly put together from rush matting covered with earth.

Ab-Ram rode gloomily at the head of the carayan, feeling that he was putting his head into a noose. It seemed incredible that a country so diligently cultivated should receive strangers without demanding anything of them in return. The caravan moved very slowly, for the hungry animals snatched at the grass and were unwilling to go on. Finally they halted in a spacious meadow bounded by a canal. While the animals and people rested, ate and drank, and were happy, Ab-Ram, filled with mournful apprehension, waited for what would happen next.

He did not have to wait long. That very same day the camp was surrounded by a detachment of soldiers, of the famous bowmen mentioned by Sarug. Their faces and heads were clean-shaven, on their heads were hair wigs to protect them from the sun, over their bare brown bodies they were wearing chain armour lined with leather, and short, white canvas skirts. At their belts swung helmets which they donned before battle. They were equipped with short swords, bows, and spears, and foursided shields hung over their shoulders. Neither the men nor their commander (who did not carry a bow, but had in his belt a small whisk for driving off the flies) knew the Babylonian tongue and, indifferent to Ab-Ram's explanations, they prepared to take the entire tribe prisoner. How matters would have gone it is impossible to say, if Hagar had not intervened. Without asking Ab-Ram's or Sarai's permission the girl ran out, knelt before the commander, beat her head on the ground in an obeisance, and talked in her own language swiftly, very wifely. She stretched out her arms, pointed eloquently to the women and children, to the emaciated cattle, to blind Igal. The warrior listened attentively, his eyes following her gestures. His men stared at these bearded strangers. Ab-Ram stood silent and angry. His expectations had been proved correct. He had trusted Sarug, and had frivolously set foot on this land. But how that bond-woman was talking and talking! And what could she say, after all? Without doubt she was pleading for mercy to be shown to them. Mercy! The one thing every man found it most difficult to endure. At last she stopped speaking, the commander answered briefly, and the girl turned to her master.

'He says he will ask the nomarch what he is to do with us. Until the answer comes he will allow us to remain if, O my lord, we give him a hostage.'

She spoke as though to an equal, but this was not the moment for a rebuke.

'Tell your fellow-countrymen, slave,' Ab-Ram answered after a moment's reflection, 'that I will give the son of my brother, the only close kinsman I have here, as hostage. Son of Hagar, go with them.'

Lot was terrified and subdued, he went without a word. As the soldiers marched away the Hebrews gazed in admiration at the perfect order of their array. Their dark, bare feet were raised in perfect time. The hanging helmets jingled quietly against the swords.

The days passed; Lot did not return. A week later two soldiers arrived at the camp. Hagar translated what they said. The nomarch Nenutef, as great and strong as a bull, as valiant as a lion, summoned the leader of the uncircumcised *Amu* to present himself to him. The nomarch was at Gesem, on the day's journey from the camp. The soldiers were under orders to conduct the '*hak*', or chief, to him.

Ab-Ram, troubled to know how he would make himself understood in the city, made ready to go. Truly Sarug had assured him that every Egyptian official knew the Babylonian speech; but more than one of Sarug's assurances had already proved inexact. If he took Hagar with him he would expose himself to ridicule. A slave, especially a slave taken prisoner in war, could be used as an interpreter; but a woman? Hagar herself resolved his doubts; he saw her standing outside the tent, ready for the journey.

'I shall follow behind your ass, my lord,' she said as though guessing his thoughts, 'and I shall remain in the courtyard with the other servants. If the noble Nenutef does not understand your speech, command that I be summoned.'

'Let it be as you say,' Ab-Ram said without enthusiasm.

The two bowmen went in front at a swift, measured pace. Ab-Ram, riding an ass, followed them, and behind him went Hagar and Sur. Ab-Ram gazed at the bowmen's shoulders, and at their clean-shaven chins. Why did everybody in this country go about looking like eunuchs? Ab-Ram, like all the dwellers in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates, would rather have allowed his nose to be cut off than his beard, that splendid sign of masculinity, and he could not understand why men allowed themselves to be so defiled of their own free will. When his astonishment was exhausted, he looked about him. Everywhere *shadufs*, the poles used for drawing water, pointed into the sky, though here and

there a more ingenious instrument was used for the same purpose. He saw several men turning a great, heavy wheel, set upⁿ perpendicularly. With their hands they hauled on spokes driven into the rim, and with their feet they trod them, so making the wheel turn. In this laborious task they seemed to be interlaced with the wheel. Then Ab-Ram's attention was drawn to round, squat bastions, windowless, and built of brick. They reminded him of the 'Well of Silence.'

Unexpectedly Hagar drew alongside the ass.

They are granaries,' she explained. 'Slaves draw the sacks of corn up to the top by means of ropes and pour the corn in, and when the tower is filled the opening is walled up. Then the king's seal is set on them. At the bottom is another opening, also walled up and sealed. They take the grain out that way when there is need.'

As she spoke she raised to her lord eyes heavily painted with antimony. Her eyelashes and brows, extended with soot right to the temples, gave the impression that her eyes were set in the sides of her head, like a bird's. Ab-Ram looked at her with unconcealed dislike. She was being familiar, and, moreover, just because she was Egyptian he attributed to her all the unpleasant things Sarug son of Ephraim had told of the Egyptians. He made no answer. She understood the silent rebuke and withdrew behind Sur, where she remained till the end of the journey.

In any case, there was no need for her presence, for interpreters were not lacking in Nenutef's court. Ab-Ram sighed with relief and felt more confident, especially when he saw Lot at the entrance. The son of Haran was quite well, and cheerful. Falling at his uncle's feet, he informed him that the Egyptians were good people, and that he would readily remain here for some time yet.

They waited for an audience in a great, chilly hall with its ceiling supported on three rows of columns; they stood among a numerous throng of local people who had come with petitions or to obtain justice. In due course they were summoned into the presence of the nomarch. Nenutef, a kinsman of the previous dynasty, held audience in an adjacent hall; he was surrounded by four beautiful slaves who fanned him, and the same number of scribes. The scribes were seated motionless on the floor, each holding a sharpened reed in his hand, and a roll of papyrus on his knees; their eyes were fixed intently on their lord's face. The nomarch was dressed in white, transparent muslin; his speech was concise and authoritative, he knew the Babylonian tongue, and did not need an

interpreter. He released Lot, authorised Ab-Ram to graze his flocks and herds in the lands of the son of Amon, lord of Upper and Lower Egypt, and indicated that an official and scribes would be sent shortly to number the people and animals. So they would suffer the humiliation of being numbered, and Ab-Ram returned with a clouded face. Engrossed in his thoughts, he hardly heard Lot, who ran at his side, talking without pause. So many interesting things had the son of Haran seen during the past week. Every day he had eaten onions, which no Hebrew had ever tasted before; it was a vegetable of great potency, which brought the tears to the eyes. And he had drunk beer made of barley. He had been amazed by the large number of scribes, who were respected by all and had easy labour. It was no laborious task to make marks with a reed instead of carving them in stone or clay. The light brown, smooth and stiff material on which they wrote was also made of a reed called papyrus, which grew in large quantities everywhere. 'It really is made of reeds,' he declared, though Ab-Ram had not cast any doubts on his story. 'They cut them down and smash them to pulp with a hammer, until the sap runs out. Then they glue strips of reed together, one longways, the next crossways, press them under stones and dry them in the sun.

'They cut the reeds they write with just as one cuts arrows, then dip the point in a black fluid and write. I have seen the stove used for making the fluid. It is as round as a landmark, and completely closed. They burn palm branches in it, and the soot accumulates on the underside of the top. They collect the soot with feathers and mix it with oil. And they count their months just as we do, from new moon to new moon; each month belongs to a different god. They have four seasons of the year, just like ours. The season of flood, the season of sowing, the season of harvesting. . . I've forgotten the fourth. They have no loathing for dogs at all, uncle Ab-Ram. I myself have seen them caressing a dog just as we do a gazelle. They have special dogs for hunting lions, others very long-legged and swift for chasing animals, yet others for catching birds. The Egyptian speech is not very difficult. If I were to stay here for any length of time I would learn it. Would I rejoice your soul, Uncle Ab-Ram, if I learned Egyptian? You would have an interpreter then.'

His uncle was obstinately silent. He was irritated by Lot's avidity for any novelty, by his curiosity about things other than those of the everyday, which was becoming in a child or a woman, but not in a man. 'Set your foot in the fetter of wisdom, your neck in its chain, and you will

learn that the only precious thing is that which is old,' Nahor, his elder brother, was fond of saying. And, of a truth, he said rightly. Ab-Ram was silent, and did not openly rebuke Lot; but only because his nephew's chatter reminded him all too vividly of his dead, dearly loved father, Terah son of Nahor, who had retained that same childish curiosity all his life.

In the days when the tribe of the sons of Eber, ben Eber, was grazing its flocks and herds in the land of Goshen, the ancient state of Upper and Lower Egypt was governed by a ruler who was the 192nd in the line of Egyptian kings wearing the double crown. The white mitre of the Southern Land, and the red diadem of the Northern Land, were united to form the crown, called *Pshent*. The line from which the Pharaoh descended was in future days to be called the Twelfth Dynasty, but the period of its rule would be described as the Middle Kingdom.

Following the example of his predecessors, the 192nd ruler hardly ever used his own name. It was carved on monuments and memorials, and used in correspondence with other rulers, but it was too eminently sacred to become generally known. It should be sufficient for his subjects to know that Pharaoh was the son of a god, and endowed with all the attributes belonging to gods. So he was as valiant as a lion, as dangerous as a wounded hippopotamus, as swift as a greyhound, as far-sighted as a hawk, as strong as a bull, as flaming as fire. His will was an iron wall, a steel elevation; his arm, an inviolable rock; his sword, flashing lightning; his voice, a rustling palm; his beauty, a flowering lotus. The specification of all these virtues took the place of a name. His true name was publicly proclaimed to the people only twice: at the time of his coronation and at the time of his burial. In the case of the present Pharaoh, this sacred and useless name was Amenemhat IV.

His predecessor, Amenemhat III, had given Lower Egypt an artificial lake, dug close to the oasis of Moeris with the labour of several hundred thousand slaves. The lake accumulated the excess of water brought down to the sea by the Nile in times of flood, and the valley was refreshed from it during the years of inadequate river-flow. In memory of this great work a palace for the king and a temple for the gods had been erected on the shore of the lake; but the present reigning Amenemhat IV had selected this same spot for the erection of his own sepulchral pyramid.

Both the temple and the pyramid were built with great strength and care, but the royal palace had been built hurriedly, and would not endure. This was because of the Egyptian belief that the gods are immortal, and the dead also, but man needs a temporal habitation only for his brief existence on earth. When the pyramid had been raised to half its intended height, Amenemhat IV journeyed from Thebes to Moeris in order to survey the work.

The Pharaoh was accompanied by his wife Atanah, who, like him, was regarded as the child of Amon. She was in her seventh month of pregnancy. The expected son would be the firstborn, the child that opened the mother's womb. The royal couple were escorted by a numerous retinue, consisting of priests, astrologers, necromancers, physicians, fowling, hunters, overseers of Pharaoh's manicurists, overseers of his hairdressers, overseers of the women's make-up, overseers of dressmakers, sandal-makers, launderers, folders of muslins, perfume-makers, masseurs, bath attendants, eunuchs, dwarfs, and slaves of both sexes. Strong military forces were posted before and behind the palace. The women's court, numbering over four hundred concubines, mostly foreigners, had been left behind in Thebes; none the less, several dozen beauties guarded by stewards and eunuchs arrived in Moeris.

An expedition so numerous, costly, and, because of the queen's state of health so dangerous, was dictated not only by the desire to inquire into the progress of Amenemhat's sepulchral pyramid. Although the priests had not yet achieved the authority they were to gain in the future, they were already no small obstacle to the carrying on of the government. The ambitious court officials, the great hunter Neferhotep, and others, endeavoured to persuade the king to oppose his will as the son of Amon to the will of Amon's servants. In this respect the exploitation of the ancient differences dividing the Southern Land from the Northern Land would be of much avail, and this was the real object of the journey.

Although they had been united more than 1,500 years before, Upper and Lower Egypt continued to form two separate states. Southern Egypt, a narrow valley walled on both sides with mountains, and closed at the southern entrance by the cataracts of the Nile, was hieratically ossified, conservative, and servilely devoted to the priests. Northern Egypt was a broad, open area bounded by the sea, and, having contacts with neighbours, it seized upon new trends, recognised the possibility of change, and sometimes revolted against the priestly pretensions. The people's inveterate

regret at the transfer of the capital from Memphis to Thebes intensified this dislike.

Pharaoh remained in Moeris for several weeks. From there five hundred vessels carried the royal couple and the court to the ancient, venerable city of Memphis. After a month they sailed on to Bubastis, situated on the right bank of the Nile. There the vessels remained, while the enormous procession set out in litters across the land of Goshen. For the great hunter Neferhotep had persuaded Pharaoh to go hunting along the borders of the country after 'zurafet', an extraordinary creature the size of a camel, and with a camel's head, but with the skin of a leopard and the swiftness of a wild goat. The nomarch Nenutef awaited his lord at the boundary of the nome of Suphtia. Walking with bare head beside the royal litter, he conducted the Pharaoh to Gesem, giving him a detailed report on the administration of the province as he went.

'What are those people so strangely attired and hairy?' Amenemhat asked, pointing to some figures with white kerchiefs on their heads and tawny cloaks round their shoulders, visible in the distance. (They were Lot, Yahiel, and several other Hebrews. Hearing that the Pharaoh was to pass, they had come out from the camp to see the procession.)

'Shepherds from the tribe of the son of Eber,' Nenutef explained. 'They have fled from Asia before the drought. I have allowed them to remain here for one year, so that when they return to their own country they may glorify thy name, O son of Amon.'

'From Asia?' Pharaoh asked in a drawling tone. He recalled the very ancient prophecy known to Egyptians, made by the prophet Nefereh in the times of the Third Dynasty, to the effect that peoples from the Asiatic deserts would threaten the Northern and the Southern States; and an even older prophecy that a shepherd of humanity would come from Asia and remove evil from the world.

'I would like to see these people,' he said unexpectedly.

'I will inform the tribe immediately of the happiness which is to be conferred upon them.'

'The cattle will remain in the camp in charge of a couple of drovers. Cattle may not cause dust and smell in the proximity of the son of Amon, the Lord of the South and the North. But all the people must go. The men, the women; the old, the children. They will set out at once from the camp in order to precede the Pharaoh's arrival at the next halting-

place, and there they will stand, awaiting his gracious favour.' With the help of Lot and Hagar, the scribe Kheti, who had been sent by the nomarch Nenutef, explained what the Hebrews were to do, and how they were to bow. Ab-Ram listened with a face as black as a hail cloud. That accursed curiosity which had led the son of Haran and his comrades to the hill to gape at the royal procession! He had justly condemned this weakness, which was always a source of complications and humiliations. Now they must go, fall on their faces, and do homage as if to God. The thing that irritated Ab-Ram most of all was that all round him he saw only contented and excited faces. They would see the Pharaoh, and so many extraordinary things, so much wealth. Hagar was out of her mind with joy, Sarai was flaming with curiosity. Her delight was damped only by her husband's will, for he had commanded the women to remain in their everyday attire. The usual white veils and linen robes. Now everybody was ready for the journey; only Edith, Lot's wife, was missing. Ab-Ram was about to ask his nephew where she was when the scribe inquired what gifts they would be making.

'Gifts . . . ? Gifts? We have no gifts.'

The scribe's face clouded over. No gifts? That was not well. To stand with empty hands in the presence of the lord, that would be an insult to the majesty of the beloved son of Amon and Osiris. Something simply must be offered to him.

'I have nothing except cattle and sheep,' Ab-Ram explained, in distress.

'Give that gazelle; the son of Amon will be glad,' the scribe suggested. 'Our most honoured lord deigns to take pleasure in animals. In his palace he has tame lions, leopards, and over a dozen gazelles.'

Sarai was plunged into despair. Ab-Ram, occupied in comforting his wife, did not notice Edith, who slipped stealthily behind the cart. She was wrapped from head to foot in grey canvas. They all set off hurriedly. As Sarai went she caressed Sebi and choked back her tears, in order not to irritate her husband, who was angry enough already. The scribe Kheti conducted them, urging them to hasten. When they reached the rise where they were to stand, a serpent of dust in the distance heralded the approach of the royal procession. So the Hebrews arranged themselves hastily, the men in one group, the women and children in another. Edith, Lot's wife, pushed forward, and threw off her grey wrapping; beneath it she was dressed like a queen. She was dazzling in a robe of silk, the very silk that Sarug son of Ephraim had shown them. Its azure ground was

striped with darker blue, and all over it was scattered a rain of white and golden flowers with crimson centres. The cut of the robe was exquisite. It was not a loose robe hanging in folds, but had a pleated skirt that reached down to the ankles, and a closely-shaped waist. Edith's face was painted, her eyes blackened, her eyelashes and brows were extended in the Egyptian fashion, she had ear-rings in her ears, a gold nezem in her nostrils. On her coppery locks was a veil as light as breath, and almost invisible. Enraptured with herself, challenging, indifferent to her husband's and Ab-Ram's wrath, she folded her arms on her breast and stood beautifully, haughty, like a statue of the goddess Isis. Against the background of the other women's linen robes she looked like a princess among slaves, and all the others choked with anger. 'The shameless, red-headed lizard!'

Ab-Ram was furious, Lot was embarrassed; but this was not the time for dealing with her: the soldiers of the bodyguard were already passing. In a moment the runners would be arriving with the royal litter.

And now they came. They halted. Beneath the heavy crown, consisting of two diadems, white and red, and under the golden ureus drawn over the brow, was the face of a prematurely aged lad with long eyes, prominent cheekbones and a chin on which even the gold artificial beard could not confer a look of resolution. In one hand he was holding a golden whisk for driving off flies. Mentally recalling the mysterious prophecies, he looked inquisitively at the foreigners' hair and beards. He passed his eyes over Edith indifferently. She was too like the Egyptian women he saw every day to arouse his interest.

Ab-Ram, with the gazelle in his arms, knelt before the king and offered him the graceful animal. Two slaves with fans of ostrich feathers stood behind the litter, while before it, facing the king, intently gazing into his ruler's face, was a young scribe with papyrus and a reed in his hands. Throughout the journey he walked backward, for he was bound to write down every word that fell from the royal lips. He seemed to catch them even before they were uttered.

'Where are you from?' the Pharaoh asked Ab-Ram in Babylonian.

'I have come from the country of Sinear, on the Euphrates. The sun devoured all the grass, and my flocks and herds would have died the death of hunger if I had not found hospitality in thy country.'

'My brother Hammurabi, son of Sin-Muballit,' the Pharaoh remarked with a sneer, 'passes for very wise, yet he still does not possess any method of overcoming drought. Our priests know how to conciliate the gods,

and the Father of Rivers never refuses us water. Write what I have said,' he turned to the scribe.

He raised his hand to stroke Sebi's head. The startled animal broke out of Ab-Ram's arms and bounded off to nestle at Sarai's feet. The son of Amon's hand was left suspended in the air, and a look of dissatisfaction appeared on his face. Everybody was dismayed. With her arm round the gazelle's neck, Sarai advanced on her knees to the litter. Her face flaming beneath the white veil, her eyes moist with recent tears, the Hebrew woman looked very beautiful. It was as though the fading magic of her unusual beauty had revived, and was entirely concentrated in that moment when least of all she had coquettish thoughts. As she gazed with a fearful and imploring look at the king, her head and that of the gazelle, nestling against each other, seemed to have very similar expressions, and both of them were beautiful.

Pharaoh looked at her with approval. His nostrils quivered.

'Who is this woman?' he asked.

'My sister,' Ab-Ram replied without hesitation.

'Then rejoice, for I shall take her and the gazelle into my palace. I permit you to graze your flocks and herds in this land so long as the grass does not grow in your country. Write,' he turned to the scribe, 'that I have thus spoken.'

He waved his whisk and the runners resumed their steady pace. The litter moved on. After it the court passed in an unending stream.

'The stripling!' Edith hissed. 'He cannot distinguish between a young woman and an old!'

Ab-Ram rose painfully from his knees. He looked at the dumbfounded, terrified Sarai. Kheti ran up, his face beaming, to congratulate them on such a great distinction.

'Curses be on my head!' Ab-Ram groaned, paying no heed to him. He fell to the ground, tearing his hair and beard in despair.

The royal procession took a long time to pass, and through Ab-Ram's head as he lay outstretched passed many mad thoughts impossible of execution. Run after the king, fall again at his feet, crying: 'Forgive me! I lied! She is my wife!' Snatch up Sarai and flee with her into the desert. Kill her before she goes to a stranger's couch, thrust into it by her husband's own act. The thoughts were born and died, new thoughts hurried on their heels. The footsteps of the marching palace myrmidons

thudded right by his head. They had not all passed when he felt a tug on his arm.

He rose. Two runners were standing with an empty, open litter. Beside them was an older, big-bellied little man with the bloated face of a eunuch.

'Where is the woman in whom the son of Amon cast his eye?' the man asked in a squeaky voice.

Without a word, Ab-Ram nodded at Sarai, his wife, his faithful, beloved comrade. She climbed into the litter, and called to Sebi to follow her. The runners picked up the poles and set off, singing in time with their steps: 'It is pleasant for us when the litter is not a burden on our arms, it is still more pleasant when we carry a beauty in it.'

The eunuch urged them on. They must overtake the stewardess who was borne immediately after the queen. As though she had been suddenly aroused, Sarai cried in a despairing voice:

'Ab-Ram!'

'My dove! When shall I see you again?' old Noa wailed in answer. Edith, green with envy, chewed her nezem with her lips.

3

Returned

THE DUST RAISED BY THE FEET OF THE RUNNERS, BY THE HOOVES OF THE camels and asses, settled again. The royal procession disappeared in the distance. There was nothing more to wait for, and Ab-Ram dragged himself back to the camp. His fellow-tribesmen discussed the king's appearance, and the dignitaries' attire; they rejoiced to have seen so much splendour. Ab-Ram walked along as though deaf, indifferent to everything outside him. That which had come to pass was so sudden and unexpected that he thought he must be the victim of an evil nightmare, of some horrible dream. Only when he shut himself away in his tent was he able to realise all the extent of the misfortune that had come upon him, and his own infamous part in it. Infamous was the word. For he had lied. He had been afraid that in his desire for Sarai the Pharaoh would command the inconvenient husband to be killed, as in the story Sarug had told him. One moment had been sufficient for the mind, as volatile as a swallow, to sense the king's desire and to guard against the danger with a lie. Formerly he had been contemptuous of men who gave up their wives in order to protect themselves; but now he had done that very same thing.

'I did not lie,' he tried to defend himself against his soul. 'Sarai really is my sister. . . .' But he was overcome with shame at the pettiness of that evasion. They were, indeed, closely akin (indeed, Noa regarded this as the cause of their lack of children), but he had long since forgotten the affinity, and for many years had thought of Sarai only as his wife. And so, unworthy of the name of man, he had lied – and had lied out of fear.

'I had to spare my days so that they should not pass suddenly, since the Lord has called me to His service,' he again excused himself. But at once he felt that a dread hand was clutching him by the throat. 'Unvirtuous and cunning man! The Lord Himself will rescue you if you are needed

by Him. It is not for you to take thought of that. Why did you not cry to Him? At one time, on the raft, when the line broke, your voice flew up to Him and you and yours crossed in safety; but what have you done now? Like a snail confident in the strength of its shell, like a serpent which wriggles and twists, you have covered yourself with your own cunning, instead of with the might of God. You did not stretch out your hand on high, you did not cry: 'Lord, hasten to my rescue! Guard me as the apple of thine eye, cover me with the shadow of thy wings.' You did not lift up your soul to God, for truly you had forgotten Him.

'You have driven out your wife and have lost her. You have affronted the Lord and have lost Him. Very well! Trust on in your own strength, since you are so confident!'

He did not close his eyes till morning. Through the canvas wall he heard Noa's mournful sobbing in the other half of the tent. But from the nearby tents laughter and talk reached his ears till late at night. This seemed strange to him, for he was accustomed to having quiet in his proximity. His fellow tribesmen always maintained a respectful silence for the area of a bowshot around his tent. So, as he now desired quietness more than ever before, in the morning he brusquely asked Eliezer what had been the reason for the chatter.

'They are rejoicing that you will take another wife, who will bear you an heir,' the old servant replied without hesitation.

'I shall not take another wife!' Ab-Ram shouted at him. 'And I do not want the people making a hubbub right by my head.'

'Live for ever, my lord! Your words are just. They should not be so noisy. They have not done so before because they feared your god. They said you had him available at your call. But now they rejoice greatly because they see that your god has not come with us to Egypt. . . .'

In his astonishment Ab-Ram forgot to be angry.

'Why do they think that?' he asked. 'The Lord is present everywhere. Here, as in Babylon or Canaan.'

'Live for ever, my lord! They judge that if it were so you would not have told the Egyptian king that your wife is your sister.'

'Listen, Eliezer! The Lord rules all the world. He is not bound by any frontiers. He has no regard for kings or states. He is everywhere. It is I, a very miserable and very paltry man, who did not cry out to Him; so He was angry with me and abandoned me.'

He covered his head with his cloak. Eliezer looked at his afflicted master

with all due respect. Mentally he was thinking that, whichever way it had been, one thing was clear: Ab-Ram had lost his god. And now the life of the tribe might be less secure, but it could be much more easy. Little by little Ab-Ram would get over his grief and would become as he had been of old, like other men.

Shut off from the world by the coarse cloak, enclosed within a narrow and stifling space, Ab-Ram reflected bitterly on the unexpected consequences of his false step, as Eliezer had revealed them to him. So he had not only offended the Lord with his falsehood and cowardice, he had caused his people to think that the Creator of heaven and earth was afraid of gods with the heads of jackals, ibises, or cows! That the Infinite did not dare to enter the land of Egypt. 'Woe be on my head!' he groaned. He realised that the glory of the Lord was reflected in the deeds of His followers. The people did not see God, they saw the deeds of those who loved Him. They judged the Lord by His servants. When Hiel was brought to judgement for doing evil with his daughter Azubah, this same Eliezer had told Ab-Ram: 'The people think your god is not concerned with justice, as you have abandoned it!' He had been warned even earlier, when Nergal Sar had revealed the past to him in a vision and had enabled him to descry the threads linking causes and effects. The first were small, like grains of corn, but the second grew and grew like trees. To the Lord sin was a double offence: because of its very essence, being contrary to His will, and because of the evil which it spread. You knew all that, Ab-Ram! It was not hidden from you. Do you think the Lord can forgive you? You, the blessed, the chosen? You, who knew the Truth?

The loneliness which he had felt after giving his brother the *teraphim*, that fear which is felt by a creature deprived of support, returned a hundred times stronger. On that former occasion the Lord had had pity on the fearful one, and had Himself spoken graciously to him. Today no one spoke. The heavens were contemptuously silent.

Ketura ran impatiently from tent to tent. 'Hagar! Hagar! Where are you? Answer me with your voice.'

The Egyptian woman did not answer. Hidden in the male half of Ab-Ram's tent, she was kneeling over a platter filled with water, into which she had carefully dropped two drops of oil. The two drops floated, gleaming golden, sometimes drawing near to each other, then separating, carried apart by the water. As she gazed at them Hagar held her breath,

and had no thought of revealing her hiding-place. But Ketura, having searched everywhere else, came upon this last spot. She was about to scold Hagar for her negligence, but when she saw what the Egyptian woman was doing she clapped her hands with delight.

'Whom are you divining for?' she asked, bending over the platter. 'I shall not tell anyone; by the gods I swear I shall not tell.'

Her panting breath disturbed the water, the drops of oil ran apart, elongated and broke up into tiny drops. Hagar did not answer, but snatched up the platter and poured the water away outside the tent. She was furious.

'What do you want of me? You hindered me.'

'Noa is calling you urgently. Why didn't you go on with the augury?'

'I just felt like stopping. And Noa can wait. She has no power to give orders now.'

'It is not as you say, Hagar. Ab-Ram son of Terah has given Noa the succession to our lady. . . .'

'Which lady?' Hagar asked with a sneer.

'Our lady, Sarai. . . .'

'Sarai will never come back, never!' Hagar repeated with emphasis. 'And who knows whether the new lady will want to keep that old woman?'

Ketura was grieved, for she loved Sarai and Noa.

'Perhaps she will return,' she sighed. 'Perhaps she will not please Pharaoh.'

'If she doesn't they will kill her and fling her to the crocodiles,' Hagar assured her. 'She will never come back here.'

Firm in this conviction, Hagar went unhurriedly to Noa.

'What do you want of me?'

Noa was embarrassed; she preferred to talk to Hagar without witnesses being present. She led her into the tent and lowered the flap.

'I want you to go, girl,' she whispered, 'to the city where the king of Egypt is staying and which is called Gesem, to find out what you can about Sarai. The son of Haran says that the Pharaoh will remain only a few days in that city, and then will return to his capital in the south. If he goes away and takes my dove with him I shall never know what is happening to her, whether she is alive or dead, happy or sorrowful. You are an Egyptian, you can find out. . . . They may let you see her.'

Hagar stood with her head sunk on her breast, thinking deeply.

'Does our lord know and allow me to be sent to the city of Gesem?' she asked.

'That is not your affair, but mine,' Noa flared up. 'I know what I am doing. Our lord will be satisfied if you go and bring back news of our lady. I have not spoken to him, for he is sitting as though mourning and does not answer to any question.'

'What am I to say to our lady?'

'Tell my dove that I am pining without her like a stalk in the desert. That my day is bitter, and my night is without end. Say that since her departure our lord neither eats nor drinks, but grieves unceasingly.'

'How can I say that, when Ab-Ram son of Terah said he is Sarai's brother?'

Noa burst into tears.

'Say what you like, only bring me news of her. Go quickly.'

'I will leave tomorrow at dawn,' Hagar decided. Her face was as enigmatic as that of a sphinx, the monster with human head which her kinsmen delighted in carving.

If the son of Amon had been residing in Thebes, or some other of the royal palaces, Hagar would have been unable to approach the women's palace. But at Gesem the court was in quarters, the object of the journey was to convince the dwellers in those parts that Pharaoh was a god as gracious as the Nile, as accessible as the sun, and so Hagar's audacity was permitted. She was allowed into the courtyard, and an overseer named Ta-Ita came out to ask her what she wanted.

'I want to greet my lady,' Hagar said humbly.

'Who is your lady?'

'The Hebrew woman.'

'The one whose hair is going grey?'

'My lady is in her years,' Hagar admitted without protest.

Not saying a word, the woman overseer fixed her eyes on space. Her look clearly said: 'We have no need of that wild old woman. She would have been suitable for the royal couch in the days of the present Pharaoh's grandfather. She cannot dance, or sing, or play; we have no place for her here. But as the most noble son of Amon has deigned to choose her, it is not for us to condemn his choice. The son of Amon cannot err.'

'What am I to say to her from you?' she asked aloud.

'Cannot your servant see her lady?'

'You cannot see her now, she is in the bath. She has a common and

rough skin, and she is bathed and rubbed with oils twice a day. Wait; when the shadows grow short you can see her.' 0

'Your servant will wait,' Hagar readily assented.

Ta-Ita measured her with a look.

'Have you been serving this lady long?'

'Very long. My father sold me to merchants in a year of famine, ten years ago; and my lord Ab-Ram, the brother of this Hebrew woman, bought me from the merchants. . . .'

'Then tell me, has she been a priestess, seeing that she has never given birth to children?'

'She has not been a priestess. She has a husband. She has not given birth to children because she is barren. Her womb is sealed. . . .'

She stopped short, for the overseer's face went pale, and her eyes dilated with horror.

'Barren!' she repeated in alarm, Raising her hands, she ran into the building. Hagar sat down in the shadow of a wall and, eating the food Noa had given her for the journey, considered what she would say to her mistress when she was allowed to see her.

'Barren!' Ta-Ita repeated, as she hurried to the queen's palace. It was a hot noontide. The royal couple were lying on a great couch, naked beneath transparent muslin. Without his doublet-crown, the ureus, and the artificial, golden beard, Amenemhat IV looked the ailing lad he really was. His wife was dozing. Her belly, swollen with her advanced pregnancy, towered above them both. 0

'What do you want, Ta-Ita?' Queen Atanah asked, lazily opening her eyes, when the overseer began to touch the pavement with her forehead.

'O, my most noble lady! O, my perfect lady! The Hebrew woman who has been brought to the palace is barren!'

'What Hebrew woman?' the queen asked in surprise.

'The Hebrew woman with the gazelle. . . . Offered to our most noble, perfect lord. . . . Barren. . . . Fruitless. . . . She cannot remain here.'

Amenemhat IV yawned.

'I know the one you speak of. The woman with the gazelle. . . . Why cannot she remain here?'

Ta-Ita wrung her hands and looked eloquently at the queen's belly. Then they both understood: a barren woman must never be allowed in the vicinity of a pregnancy, for her presence would cause a miscarriage.

The country of Amon was impatiently awaiting the birth of a new son of the gods. In the other world the goddesses were already making preparations for the confinement. Pakht with his lion's head, Hket with his frog's head, Meshkent with the head of a hippopotamus, and Taurt with the head of a crocodile. Hathor herself would be in charge at the birth - the great Hathor, the sacred cow, the special guardian of the dynasty. No less preparations were being made on earth. The common people were waiting anxiously for the birth which would bring a break in their labour, and the distribution of bread, oil, and wine. All the court was waiting, the priests were waiting for a new son of Amon, the dynasty was waiting. And all these hopes might be dashed by the presence of one accursed Hebrew woman, the sister of an unclean *Amu*.

Without exchanging a word they recalled all this, and Amenemhat IV ceased to yawn. He turned and rested on one elbow.

'Let her be killed immediately,' he ordered.

'Yes, yes, let her be killed,' Queen Atanah repeated.

Ta-Ita ventured to oppose the command. She shook her head. In a choking voice she stammered that the Hebrew woman was healthy and beautiful. If, none the less, she was barren, then she must be inhabited by a demon. . . . And if the Hebrew woman perished, the demon might wreak its vengeance on . . . on . . . She did not dare to utter the awful possibility aloud.

The queen was terrified. She sat up on the couch, embracing her belly as though already defending it against the demon's vengeance. Pharaoh was put out.

'Then what am I to do?' he asked. 'What a complicated question!'

'O, my most perfect lord! Of your wisdom and magnanimity send the Hebrew woman back to her brother with gifts and the words: "I have learnt that this woman has a husband, why did you not tell me at once?" The demon will depart with her satisfied, and will not work to our injury here.'

Pharaoh sighed with relief.

'I will do as you counsel, Ta-Ita. Command that she be given the dowry fitting to women who have shared my couch, and let her depart at once.'

'It shall be as you say, my most perfect lord.'

Once more Ta-Ita bowed till her forehead touched the pavement, then went out hurriedly. Reassured, the royal couple lay down again, resuming their interrupted doze.

And so, on the evening of the following day, when the sinking sun was bestowing on all things long, slanting shadows, as Ab-Ram sat plunged in grief Noa rushed like a mad woman into the tent.

'My lord!' she cried, 'Sarai is returning. My lady, my dove, is returning. She is quite close, and behind her are asses and camels.'

It was true. Sarai was returning, borne in a litter, escorted by four bowmen and two eunuchs. She was attired and adorned so beautifully that Edith's splendid robe would have seemed faded by comparison. A necklace similar to that which Terah son of Nahor had once hung round the image of Marduk decorated her neck. On her arms gold and jasper bangles glittered. Behind the litter came four camels heavily loaded, and as many asses laden with sacks. When Sarai stepped out of the litter she seemed a stranger to them all, a being inexpressibly beautiful and dignified. No one dared to speak to her, to approach her. Even Noa only stretched out her arms from a distance and sighed with rapture and happiness. But the magnificent beauty knelt down before her husband, who was standing motionless, and kissed his feet. Then looking into his eyes, she said:

'I have been in no other man's couch, my lord, and I have seen no man except the eunuchs set to guard us.'

He did not hear what she said. He raised her from the ground and gathered her to his heart, fervently, as though she were a refund treasure. He was again possessed by the feeling that all that was happening was a dream, a chimera. Unexpectedly Sarai had been taken from him, and just as suddenly she had returned.

'Will you remain with me, woman?' he asked hesitantly.

'O yes, Ab-Ram; I have returned.'

'How is it that they sent you away? Whose are these bales?'

'They are all mine, Ab-Ram.'

For some time the senior eunuch had been attempting to interrupt this brotherly and sisterly conversation. He was inwardly astonished at the tenderness this couple showed to each other. Ab-Ram noticed him, and listened to his speech. Horus the hawk, Horus the serpent, Horus the golden, the menacing lion, the roaring lion, the mighty bull, the lord of the South and the North, the beloved and chosen son of Amon, had sent back the woman he had taken a fancy to, having heard that she had a husband. The son of Amon had commanded him to say: 'What is this that thou hast done unto me? Why didst thou not tell me? I have not

touched her, and I send her away that no misfortune may come upon me. Accept the woman, give her back to her husband together with the gifts I have offered to her. These are my words, the words of Pharaoh, lord of the south and the north.'

'Tell your noble lord that he has returned me the joy of my days, the crown of my years. May his days be blessed, and his reign happy.'

The eunuch made a low bow and climbed into the empty litter. The runners set off at once, followed by the soldiers. Sarai remained. Now at last Ab-Ram believed she had come back indeed. Eliezer and Sur and several others unloaded the camels and removed the bales from the asses, setting out the bundles before the tent. Ab-Ram did not look at them. He held Sarai's hand in his own hand.

'Did you tell him you have a husband?' he asked, unable to trace the course of these latest developments.

'My lord, your servant told them nothing. They learned from Hagar. . . .'

'Hagar?' Only now did Ab-Ram notice the bondswoman. She had followed the litter, and was helping to carry away the gifts, unconcerned, with her usual impersonal expression. How had she come to be at the royal palace? Ab-Ram understood less and less.

'I have not thanked her yet!' Sarai exclaimed, and she kissed the Egyptian woman in front of them all. She took off a valuable bangle and put it on the girl's arm. All the other women gazed enviously at the slave who had been given such a gift. But Hagar did not seem to be delighted at all. She kept her eyes obstinately fixed on the ground.

'The bondswoman Hagar came to the royal palace and took steps to secure my return,' Sarai announced. 'I will give her whatever she desires.'

The Egyptian woman's black eyes glittered beneath her painted eyelids. She gave her mistress a swift glance and lowered her head again. Noa muttered:

'Not so fast, my dove. . . . It was I who sent Hagar. . . .'

'Whatever I have is yours, Noa. May the gods send blessings on your head.'

Sarai went into the tent to change into ordinary attire. Of a truth, she would gladly have shown herself to Lot's wife, dressed as she now was in the splendid raiment of a king's concubine; but Edith, already informed of what had happened, was in no hurry to come and see her. Ab-Ram

followed his wife into the tent, and watched fondly as she removed the costly muslins and golden silks and wrapped herself in coarse sun-bleached linen.

They were alone. She went to him.

'Is your soul glad that I have returned, Ab-Ram?' she softly asked.

'My soul was as though dead because you had gone; but now it has revived,' he replied, putting his arm round her.

Noa entered and called to them to come and admire the treasures which the Pharaoh had bestowed on Sarai. Costly woven materials, jewels, gold and silver vessels, gold ear-rings, necklaces, diadems, chains, rings, bracelets. Amphoras containing perfumes, fans, beautiful caskets. The royal dowry given to every woman chosen by Pharaoh was designed to strengthen his subjects' conviction that he was of 'divine' origin, for only a god could be so munificent. The quantity and quality of the articles that made up the dowry had long been established, and was not subject to alteration; and so among Sarai's gifts were children's toys: beautifully-dressed wax dolls, and a silver crocodile which moved its head and tail when drawn by a string. Sarai set the toys aside for Lot's little daughters.

Amid the general excitement and wonder only Ab-Ram remained indifferent. He had no pleasure in gold. He trusted his wife, but he could not understand why she had been given such munificent gifts. It was understandable that Pharaoh had sent away the woman on hearing that she had a husband; but why so many presents?

'Every woman who has spent even one day in the women's palace receives the same dowry,' Sarai explained, sensing her husband's hesitation. 'To our eyes this seems a great thing, but they have so much wealth that they regard such a gift as nothing.'

'Do you really think you were sent back just because you had a husband?'

'It is simply that I am old,' she replied with a forced smile. 'All the others were quite young girls. . . . And besides . . .'

She broke off, miserable at the thought of the painful humiliation she had suffered. This free, wild woman from the desert had felt very unhappy in the royal palace. Her elegant, pampered companions had laughed at her neglected hands and feet. In the bath the slaves had scrubbed her with brushes and had poured hot water over her, heedless of whether it caused her pain. She had not known how to walk, she had not known

how to pass whole days doing nothing. For the first time in her life she had dwelt in a fine palace, had sat in a carved chair, had eaten at a golden table; and she had hated it all. She had wept continually with yearning for her tent and for Ab-Ram, for the camp fire and the couch of skins. Yet that had not been the worst. She still burned with shame as she recalled the moment when the woman overseer, Ta-Ita, had entered the hall where a throng of women were occupied in playing, singing, and throwing a ball, while she, Sarai, sat grieving alone in a corner. The overseer had called out in Babylonian: 'Barren woman!' Sarai had guessed at once that the words were meant for her and had got up; but one or two of the other women knew the Babylonian speech and had translated the call to the others, until they had all begun to call after her: 'Barren! Barren!' Sarai had followed the overseer out as though she were walking over hot coals, feeling the other women's derisive eyes fixed on her. Then Ta-Ita had said: 'You will return to your husband, you barren woman!'

She confided all this to Ab-Ram later in the evening, as they lay side by side in the tent. Nestling her head on her husband's arm, she wept long over her misfortune. Men look with loathing at a eunuch, yet a barren woman is worse than a eunuch. A eunuch can be of use as a servant, and can even hold office in a royal court; but a barren woman is of no value to anyone. There is as much use from her as from a withered stalk.

He caressed her, without speaking. So often down the years had he heard these same complaints, so often had he himself suffered from his lack of a son, that he did not feel like repeating words already uttered too often.

'I haven't thanked you yet,' Sarai whispered through her tears, 'for telling the king I was your sister. . . .'

'Why should you thank me for that?' he asked, painfully surprised.

'You wanted to spare me the shame. . . I know! You were afraid the king would ask: "And where are your children?"'

'But supposing I said it for some other reason, woman?' he asked.

'What other reason? Don't deny it, Ab-Ram. You are good, and thank you. . . .'

She nestled to him, but he felt only contempt for himself. He should have confessed his cowardice. But Sarai would not have believed him.

Among the many articles included in Sarai's dowry was a musical instrument popular among Egyptian women: a harp. It stood high, as high as a man, and had a beautifully carved frame. The tautened strings trembled gently beneath the touch.

'All the women in the royal court played very beautifully on this instrument,' Sarai admitted. 'They stood and fingered the strings like this....'

She tried to imitate the graceful movements of the Egyptian harpists, but she produced only a discordant jangle. Impatiently she thrust the instrument away with her foot.

'Let my lady give the harp to her servant,' Hagar asked. Sarai readily agreed.

'It is yours. Can you play it? Then play.'

'I don't know how to,' Hagar replied, taking the harp with obvious satisfaction. Recently she had also asked for a gilded tripod intended for burning incense, and a full sack of myrrh-scented resin. Sarai was not interested in perfumes. 'I prefer the tang of the air,' she said, 'to the smoke in the royal palace. It made me feel faint.'

Sarai gave Edith, Lot's wife, some magnificent gifts, taking great pleasure in throwing jewels and other presents on to the red-haired woman's knees. 'Here, you can have this. And so, I am not interested in these trifles, I have been given so many of them. Just look!' The copper-haired woman took the gifts and bit her lips. Suddenly she sighed with

'Did they not want to give you a gold nezem, aunt?' she asked in a tone of sympathetic commiseration.

'They did not give me any nezem,' Sarai exclaimed triumphantly, 'because in Pharaoh's court only slave women have rings in their noses.'

Edith went white. Hagar and Ketura, who were listening outside, laughed till they cried. Noa impatiently gave them a whack on the back with a ladle, justly fearing that they would drop the bag of cream which they were to churn into butter.

As they hung the bag on a tripod or poles set in the ground, Ketura asked her companion:

'Hagar, do tell me what you did to get our lady returned. Everybody thinks it very astonishing that you were able to do such a thing.'

Hagar's merriment died away. Grumpily, in her normal manner, she replied that she had done nothing.

'Our lady herself said it was you,' Ketura insisted. 'She kissed you and gave you gifts. . . . Do tell me what it was you thought of.'

'Sometimes it happens that you think of one thing, and something quite different comes of it,' Hagar said inscrutably, and she pulled so hard at the rope attached to the bag that the tripod swayed.

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'Let OF HARAN,' AB-RAM SAID HARSHLY, 'MY SOUL WILL NO LONGER agreed'ure the behaviour of your drovers. My people complain to me

'It may about your servant Hibal, your servant Asez, and others. I give

'I complaints just consideration, and observe that your people are satisfy to blame. Why they do it, I know not. They are deliberately working to my harm. They incite bulls and drive them among my heifers. They scatter my sheep, which afterwards are unable to find their lambs. For over two years we had peace, and I praised you. A sacred thing, is peace. I was glad to think that this arbitrary behaviour would not occur again. But now it is ofice more poisoning my life. And, as I have said, I have had enough.'

Ab-Ram and Lot were standing on a rise which overlooked a valley. Behind them stretched the Negeb, or Dry Land, which they had just crossed. Far to the right, beyond a chain of hills, a low white mist indicated the position of the Salt Lake, lying in a deep valley. Two months had passed since the Hebrews had left Egypt, immediately after the first spring rains, to return to the land of Canaan through which they had journeyed the previous year.

'It is hard for me to utter such words, son of my brother,' Ab-Ram continued without waiting for an answer; 'but I have decided that we shall no longer continue together. It is better to part than to live in squabbles which estrange and are as bitter as bad herbs. Behold, before us lies a fertile land in which no one forbids us to graze our herds. Depart from me, I pray you. If you go to the east, I shall go to the west. If you go to the west, I shall go to the east. We shall not come together again, son of my brother. Before we part we shall raise a mound, which neither your herds and flocks nor mine shall pass.'

Though Ab-Ram's voice sounded hard and unyielding, he still hoped

his nephew would be alarmed and would promise amendment, and would ask him to withdraw his decision. He was disposed to do so. But Lot readily agreed to his proposal that they should part.

'Let it be as you say, uncle. You yourself deign to choose the way you will go. The choice is not for me, who am your servant.'

'Right or left, they are both equally good in my eyes,' Ab-Ram replied, unpleasantly surprised. 'I have said that you shall choose. Choose!'

'Since that is your will, I shall choose,' Lot hurriedly agreed. 'I would like to settle in the valley of Siddim, to the south of the Salt Lake.'

'Siddim. . . . Siddim. . . . I have heard that name before, but I cannot remember where. What is this valley?'

'It lies to the east from here, Uncle Ab-Ram.' Lot grew more enthusiastic and confident. 'It is very beautiful, and as fertile as Egypt. The grass grows as high as a man's girdle, and there are so many trees that it is also called the Wooded Valley. All around it are hills, and the wind from the desert never penetrates because the hills protect it. The water flows naturally into the canals, for the valley slopes southward.'

'Where does the water flow from?'

'From the Salt Lake. There are rocks which form a kind of stone threshold, and the valley opens out below them. Through clefts in the rocks the water drips into ponds. In the ponds the salt sinks to the bottom, and the water runs on into canals. There is not one spot in all the valley which it does not reach. And so trees grow there, and flowers such as are not to be found anywhere else in the world.'

'When did you see this valley?'

'I haven't seen it; the merchant Sarug son of Ephraim travels every year to the Salt Lake for bitumen, and he told my wife about it.'

'I am surprised that it is uninhabited, if it is so fertile.'

'Uncle Ab-Ram, very many people dwell in the valley. It has five cities: Sodom, Gomorrah, Zoar, Admah, and Zeboiim. The largest is Sodom.'

'Where will you go with your herds amid such a multitude?'

'If I could obtain a small expanse of meadowland it would suffice, for the grass grows continually. The air is humid, and the night is as warm as the day. The cities are rich. The people live carefree lives. they dance, they sing, and watch the games. . . .'

'The life your wife desires! I understand!'

They were both silent. Ab-Ram stroked his beard thoughtfully.

'Son of Haran,' he said after a moment, 'why did you not tell me before, as man to man, that you wished to leave the tribe, and had already chosen the district in which you wished to settle?'

Lot reddened like a small boy.

'I was afraid of your anger,' he confessed.

'My anger? Did I detain Nahor son of Terah?'

'And I was sorry at the thought of parting from you, Uncle Ab-Ram.'

'Ah, and I too am sorry, blood of mine! But what can I do? I have spoken, you have spoken. The tree does not hold back the leaf which has fallen and is driven whither the wind carries it. Go in peace, Lot, since that is your desire, taking with you all that is yours. . . .'

'Blessed be all thy days, Uncle Ab-Ram. I shall depart at the next new moon.'

'So Edith has got her way,' Sarai remarked discontentedly, as she turned over the handle of an Egyptian mirror in her hand. 'For a couple of years she has been working to make you order Lot to depart.'

'The lion does not fight with a snake, a man does not see through a woman's cunning. But why did the son of Haran not speak to me about it before?'

'Lot told Edith he himself would never part from you, unless you commanded him. So Edith incited the herdmen, especially Hibal, and gave them gifts. . . . In the desert and in Egypt she was quiet, for she was afraid they would perish if left by themselves in a strange country.'

'Who told you all this?'

Sella told Moa. She did not speak before because she was afraid.'

Ab-Ram knitted his brows. He was angry with himself for being carried away by his indignation and so unconsciously doing the will of the foreign woman.

'Why did you allow him to choose?' Sarai asked. 'Why cannot we ourselves settle in that beautiful valley?'

'I acted as I desired, woman,' her husband replied with emphasis. Sarai drooped her head, abashed. Truly, in the past she would not have dared to speak to Ab-Ram in such a manner. The woman's part is to obey her husband's commands without protest. But since Ab-Ram had grown humbler, and depressed in spirit, she had grown bolder. The unpleasant memories of her stay in the royal palace were slowly being erased, but she still remembered the wealth she had brought Ab-Ram. And that

made her feel important. She was glad, too, that he no longer talked at night with his god, of whom she was greatly afraid.

'Do me one kindness, my lord,' she asked.

'Say what you wish of me, Sarai?'

'Grant that as we journey I may walk beside your ass.

He pondered on this request, which was an invasion of his solitary meditations.

'You will not walk beside my ass; but every day I will summon you and you will ride for a time beside me at the head of the caravan.'

'Thank you, Ab-Ram!' she exclaimed, made happy at his decision.

The mound which was to testify that the uncle and nephew had gone different ways, was high, and well built of rocks, the larger stones at the bottom, and smaller and smaller towards the top. The top was left flat, for an offering to the gods should be made upon it. The blood of the slaughtered animal would flow down between the stones, and give the testimony might and authority. But Ab-Ram was not willing to make sacrifices to gods whom he had long since rejected, and he did not dare to make a sacrifice to the True Lord. He felt guilty, and was afraid lest the Lord should reject his offering in the eyes of all the tribe. So the mound was not sanctified with sacrificial blood, but two yearling sheep were slaughtered on it and cooked. One was taken from Ab-Ram's flocks, the other from Lot's; one was white, the other black. Then the uncle and his nephew went up the mound, gripped each other's right hand, and consumed the lambs in the sight of the entire tribe. The bones were thrust under stones, while the two men solemnly repeated the words that Lot's flocks and herds would never travel farther westward than the mound, while Ab-Ram's would never pass beyond it to the east. When they had exchanged these vows, Lot fell at his uncle's feet; but Ab-Ram raised him and embraced him. And all the congregation saw that they both wept, for it is hard to part from one's own blood. At last Lot wiped his eyes and ran down the mound to his own people. Edith, seated on a camel, was waiting impatiently for the end of the ceremony. With her sister, who was a year older than she, little Lilit stood on the cart which Lot had made at Ur, shaking her favourite silver crocodile. The drovers awaited the sign to drive off the flocks and herds gathered into one drove. Hitherto they had faithfully performed all that their mistress had asked, but now they were beginning to realise that the result would not be good for

them. There is always more life in a large group; and besides, Ab-Ram son of Terah was a chief under whose authority it was pleasant to remain. He would never let his people perish. He was an enlightened and just man. Now they would come under the authority of a woman, for the son of Haran was not to be reckoned with at all.

At the very last moment before parting Ab-Ram gave his nephew twelve head of cattle and six asses. Then the two men said goodbye once more, and the horns were blown. The drovers cracked their whips. One caravan turned off to the left; the other, less numerous, to the right. Yet another branch had been broken off from the ancient tribe of the sons of Eber.

'I am glad, my soul, that I shall not see the red-hair again,' Sarai declared as she went at her husband's side. Ab-Ram gave her a reproachful look.

'My soul weeps that I let the son of Haran go,' he said.

'Since they departed we have had peace.'

'Surely it is better to renounce peace than one's own blood? I am fond of the son of Haran. Of a truth, I had not thought that I was so fond of him. At one time I thought he would have a son whom I would make my heir.'

'Red-hair did not want to have any more children, my lord. She did not want to have children,' Sarai repeated in a tone of horror.

'I thought that was so. I once threatened to bring Lot to judgement. I let the matter pass, not because I had forgotten it, but . . .'

He broke off, unwilling to add that it would have been awkward for him to judge his nephew when he himself possessed a barren wife and did not take another woman.

Sarai guessed what he was thinking, her face clouded, and they rode on in silence, until Ab-Ram himself renewed the conversation.

'I remember, when I was a little child, and later, when I reached the years of my youth, there were three of us, brothers. Haran, Nahor, and I, the sons of Terah. Our father was justified in expecting many grandsons, and could rejoice in the future of the line. . . . But all those hopes have gone for nothing, for Haran died after fructifying only the one child, Lot, who today has departed from us. Nahor we had already parted from, and in any case he will not have a son now. And I shall remain childless. What will happen to the tribe? Is it surprising that I grieve, Sarai? But now know, that last year, before I offended the Lord, when I was riding

through the same land towards which we are now journeying, I heard the Lord's voice saying that this land, this very land and none other, would be given to my seed. I know not whether the Lord was jesting with me, but I am all the more afflicted thereby. I know not whom to make my heir, unless it be the son of my servant Eliezer; for the Damascene is faithful.'

He broke off, realising that he was talking as though to a man, while only a woman was listening. He glanced at her attentive eyes fixed on his face, and said to her absently:

- 'Return now to the women, Sarai.

That year the spring rains were abundant, as though the gods wished to make recompense for the previous year's drought; the earth all about the caravan was green with grass and colourful with flowers. None the less Ab-Ram's face remained clouded and Sarai's thoughtful, and it often happened that they rode side by side for long periods without speaking. Absorbed in his own anxieties, Ab-Ram did not stop to consider the reason for such extraordinary silence on the part of a woman.

The reason was simple: Sarai had repeated her last conversation with Ab-Ram to her old foster-mother, and Noa in turn had not delayed to repeat it all to Eliezer, who, deeply moved, had run to his mistress.

'I am unworthy!' he exclaimed, 'and my son is unworthy, we are both unworthy to be the heirs of Ab-Ram son of Terah. Do not allow it, my lady. I am a servant, and my boy is simple, uninstructed. That is not the heir Ab-Ram needs. My lady, listen to your servant. Give my lord another wife. Ab-Ram is not young, but he is strong and healthy. Perhaps he will quicken many sons. Seek a wife for him and bring her to your tent. We shall all call down blessings on your head. No wrong is done to the first wife when the husband takes another. . . . Listen!'

He spoke for a long time, and more and more boldly, heedless of the fact that Sarai was listening to him with her brows knitted. The only witness, Noa, was silent, which indicated that she shared Eliezer's opinion. Sarai dismissed the servant, promising to think over his counsel. She was plunged into a profound inward conflict. Undoubtedly Eliezer was right, but how difficult it was to think of another woman at her husband's side! A young woman, a woman who would have children. . . . Ab-Ram's heart would turn from Sarai and cling to the mother of his children. He would caress them, carry them, rejoice with his new wife over them; and

then she, Sarai, could die, for no one would want her. 'No!' she thought passionately; 'no other woman will enter this tent!'

Yet the God of Ab-Ram had promised him the beautiful land of Canaan as the heritage of his seed. The line of Ab-Ram might be exalted above all other lines, might rule all the land. But this would not come to pass so long as Sarai, who herself had no children, refused to allow another woman. . . .

She wrestled with her thoughts, and did not hear when others spoke to her. In the sleepless nights she tossed and turned, sighing. Until one night she hit upon a solution so happy that she was unable to restrain herself, and aroused Ab-Ram.

'Who called me?' he asked, sitting up on the couch. 'Was it you Sarai?' There was a note of disillusionment in his voice. . .

'I know now,' she whispered fervently, 'what to do so that you should have offspring. The priest who used to come to the camp at Ur once told me. . . I think he was called Sep-Sin. . . You remember that priest, Ab-Ram?'

'I remember Sep-Sin very well. What did he tell you?'

'He said that according to Babylonian law, if a barren wife brings a slave to her husband's bed and says: "quicken a son to me from her, that I may have him," and if the slave brings forth a son, they take the child from her and give it to the wife, and he will be their son, the true heir of the husband and wife. . . Do you understand, Ab-Ram?'

'Woman! You could have waited till morning, without waking me up in the night!' Ab-Ram exclaimed, half annoyed, half amused. 'What do you want of me?'

'I want the prophecy of your god to be fulfilled,' Sarai explained. 'I want you to have a son, and, as my womb is closed, let him be born to another; only, let him be my son. . . .'

'Calm yourself, Sarai, and sleep.'

He turned over and fell asleep at once. But Sarai did not sleep till dawn had come. Next morning she shared her idea with her foster-mother. Noa showed much less enthusiasm.

'A second wife,' she said, 'is a second wife. We know what sort of bird she is. But you want to give him a bondswoman? She will grow familiar and demand that I should wait on her.'

'We shall take her son and send her away,' Sarai decided.

'Not so easy my dove; not so easy.' Noa shook her head doubtfully.

Sarai's greatest difficulty was to convince her husband. Ab-Ram sincerely regretted that he had told Sarai of the secret voice of the Lord who had spoken to him the previous year. He had never been swift to impart confidences, especially to a woman; but of late he was frequently possessed by an irresistible desire to recall those past days, to talk about them. Now he had succumbed to this desire, and had lost his peace.

Sarai's importunity only intensified his regret. The Lord's promises and blessings were true, just as his own cowardice and pettiness were true. People who paid homage to Marduk, Nannar-Sin, or Amon could sin, lie, and be faithless as they wished; the gods were unconcerned. The difference between them and the Lord, as Ab-Ram clearly realised, consisted not only in His might but in His stern requirement that man should mould himself on the image and likeness of his Creator. In light there is no place for darkness. In the presence of the Lord there could be no sin. Once committed, sin was irrevocable. People said that the first things necessary to life were water, fire, iron, salt, milk, wine, honey, oil and raiment. Yet surely in the first place they should set God? He was as necessary as water, fire, and bread. In Him was the dignity that man had lost, in Him was the memory of the lost glory. Without the Lord on High, there was truly no great difference between man and a jackal.

And Ab-Ram, living in the belief that God had spurned him, felt as worthless and wretched as a jackal.

His depression was favourable to Sarai's designs. Tiny grains of sand will overwhelm a tower. Little by little her persistent attacks made a breach in Ab-Ram's resistance. 'Who knows,' he reflected, 'whether my wife is not right? Instead of making Eliezer's boy my heir, I would have my own son.'

His position as head of the tribe forbade him to take part in the women's counsels, but he listened to their talk without his previous reluctance.

'Take Ketura, my dove; take Ketura,' old Noa advised Sarai. 'She's a strong girl, and as broad as a cow in the haunches. She might give birth to twins. She is meek, and quiet, she will not cause you any trouble.'

'I prefer Hagar,' Sarai answered. 'If she had not gone to Gesem I would have remained with the Pharaoh and pined away with yearning. She deserves the distinction.'

'Your Hagar is a double-dealing snake. She bites by stealth. It was I who sent her to Gesem. She would never have gone of her own accord.'

Unexpectedly Ab-Ram joined in:

'I don't like Hagar; her eyes are like a bird's.'

'You see, my dove!' Noa exulted. 'Give our lord Ketura!'

Sarai shook her head. She considered that she should show her gratitude to the Egyptian woman; and besides, Hagar was beautiful and slender, while Ketura was coarse and ugly. Sarai wanted Ab-Ram's child to be beautiful, more beautiful than any other; she did not wish it to inherit Ketura's thick, stocky calves; and besides – and this played an even greater part in her decision – she was not fond of resigning a project she had planned.

Though these conversations were held in secret, some news of them must have spread through the camp, for all the girls, whether free or slaves, dressed themselves up in their finery and began to hang around close to Ab-Ram's tent. Ab-Ram went about with clouded face, and did not notice them; he considered that the whole affair concerned only him and his wife. Sarai stuck to her plan for bringing Hagar to his bed. At last, bored with the whole idea, and realising that he would get no peace otherwise, he agreed. Unwillingly enough, Noa ordered the Egyptian woman to go to a separate tent to sleep.

When dusk fell, Sarai, satisfied at last, led her husband to Hagar's tent. She raised the entrance flap, and stopped short in amazement. Resin mingled with myrrh was burning on the small golden tripod; the stupefying scent filled all the interior. The couch was covered with a costly covering. Hagar, the bondwoman, was kneeling in the middle of the tent, her body bowed low. Her long black hair reached to the ground, concealing her features.

A little discomfited, Sarai stood by her husband, and said aloud the words she had carefully chosen:

'My husband and lord, go to this slave and quicken within her a son that I may have him. And the son that comes from her womb will be my son and thine, not hers. Bondwoman Hagar, do you hear my words?'

The only answer was an unintelligible whisper that floated out from under the cascade of hair. The kneeling girl seemed as immobile as a statue.

'I will leave thee, my lord,' Sarai said with none of her former enthusiasm, and went out. When the flap had dropped behind her Hagar slowly straightened up and threw her hair back. Her eyes glittered in the gloom. The resin mingled with myrrh spluttered as it burned.

'O, my lord!' Hagar cried ardently, stretching out her swarthy arms. 'Thou hast heard the voice of my longing. O, Ramch!'

As Sarai returned to her tent she was lost in thought. A weight rested on her heart. She did not know why, but she felt sure she would have been more tranquil in spirit if she had left Ab-Ram with Ketura. She comforted herself with the hope that Ab-Ram would return quickly, and she waited for him impatiently. But the night passed, dawn broke, and Ab-Ram did not return.

5

Desire

HAGAR WAS LYING WHEN SHE TOLD SARAI SHE COULD NOT PLAY THE harp, or else she had taught herself the art during the last few months, after, by Ab-Ram's order, she had been set free from labour. In any case her fingers now ran quite expertly over the strings, and Ab-Ram listened with pleasure to her playing. He lay on his back, his hands beneath his head, gazing approvingly at the figure of the woman standing by the harp. Her waist had already lost its slim outline, but her graceful hands ran across the strings as sinuously as snakes.

Noticing his gaze, she stopped playing and seated herself beside him on the couch.

'Honey and milk are under thy tongue,' she whispered. 'Kiss me with the kiss of thy lips.'

He tenderly put his arm round her. He was looking much younger of late. His beard streaked with silver adorned a face almost youthful, and the smile quivering on his lips did not allow any hint of his former expression of authority.

The woman nestled against him.

'Set me as a seal upon thine heart,' she breathed. 'My bowels are moved at thy touch.'

'Do I not flame like a fire?' he whispered. 'Beautiful art thou and pleas in delight. . . .'

'Ab-Ra Ab-Ram!' someone called outside the tent.

'Sarai is calling to supper,' he said, trying to rise. Smiling, Hagar rested both her hands on his chest, holding him down with all the weight of her body.

'Thou wilt not rise, Rameh! Why needst thou rise? Because Sarai is calling? I will go to thy wife, to the tent, and bring thee supper; I will give thee to eat, I will wait upon thee, and then I will tell thee a story. . . .'

'What about?' he asked, acquiescing in her suggestion. He did not feel like facing Eliezer's and Noa's shocked gaze, or Sarai's mournful eyes.

She shook her head to indicate that she would not tell him yet, and ran out. Lying idle and slothful, Ab-Ram gazed dreamily at the tent canvas. His mind was not occupied with thoughts. He was speaking the truth when he had said a few moments before that he was flaming like a fire. An insatiable desire was consuming him for the first time in his life. Once, years before, when as a clean, serious youngster he had espoused the beautiful and beloved Sarai, he had been happy, he had been passionate; but it had been a tranquil and healthy passion. His desire had been satisfied and had passed, leaving him a clear mind and a strong body. But Hagar . . . O, Hagar. . . Who had taught her those amazing, provocative tricks that inflamed all his body? He was the first man she had known. Had she left home as a child? Was it really true that Egyptian women had desire poured into their blood, as Sarug had said? When he asked Hagar about it she smiled mysteriously and, harrowing her painted eyes, thought of some new voluptuous delight. At first he had been ashamed and shocked; but then, absorbed by the novelty of the experience, he had yielded completely to her will. And she was insatiable, ceaselessly athirst, quite different from the proud, never importunate Sarai.

Sometimes Ab-Ram was amazed as he recalled that Hagar had spent many years in his service, and had always been a quiet, apparently indifferent, obedient slave. He had not known her, had not liked her; she had concealed within herself all the treasure of her amatory feelings, her love for him. She assured him now that she had loved him from the first day she saw him. And so, although she had given up all hope of his ever deigning to notice her, she had not allowed any man to come to her. 'And I have lived to see this day,' she declared triumphantly. 'It is the goddess Ishtar who has done this. When we were in Egypt I laid on her altar the gold bangles Sarai had given me. . . . The goddess heard me. . . .'

'I will give you other bangles, still more beautiful,' he assured her.

Did he feel well or ill in his present condition? If he had been asked he would not have known how to answer. Formerly so active mentally, so fond of having an answer to everything, now he did not stop to think at all. His body desired Hagar's body, and he succumbed to the flesh.

It was the first time he had been in subjection to the senses. Terah son of Nahor had made his youngest son his successor when Ab-Ram was still quite young, he had put command of the tribe in the hands of a

beardless youth. Ab-Ram had been dominated by the dignity conferred on him; he had strained his powers and his mind to cope with his task; of licence, or even of lawful amusement he could not think. By his dignity he made up for his youth and inexperience. He slowly grew accustomed to this dignified authority, and could not change. And so the secret of the power Hagar had over him was to be found, perhaps, not only in the refinements of her sensuality. She was the first woman who had succeeded in piercing beneath his rigid integument and reminding him of the youth he had never enjoyed.

He liked everything connected with her, even the fact that she called him by the diminutive 'Rameh'. No one had ever used that name to him before, except, perhaps, his mother, whom he did not remember. And that was long, long ago. The affix 'Ab' given him by Terah when he handed over authority to his son had turned his forename into the title 'high father'. That title had stuck to the serious youth.

Hagar returned, carrying on her head a large shallow basket filled with vessels. A jug of milk, a jug of cream, honey, Noa's tasty barley cakes, apricots and grapes. She knelt down by the couch without removing the basket from her head, and urged him to take food straight from it.

'First remove the burden from your head and eat together with me.'

Carefully setting the basket down, she gave him food to his lips. She breathed on every piece solicitously. As he watched her cooling even the grapes in this manner, he asked her why she did so. She laughed and displayed her white teeth, gleaming amid her swarthy complexion and painted lips.

'I am making magic,' she said, 'so that you will not cease to love me.'

'I shall not cease to love you,' he assured her, 'since it is good for me when you are at my side. But now tell me the story you promised me.'

'I will tell it as soon as I have washed the vessels. Wait till I have brought water. . . .'

'Tell me now. Let Noa wash them, or Ketura.'

'You speak the truth, my beautiful lord, my powerful Rameh, my glittering moon. Noa will wash them and your slave will tell you a story.'

She packed the empty vessels in the basket, set it just outside the tent, and called in a loud, commanding tone:

'Ketura! Noa! Let someone come and take and wash the vessels after our lord's supper.'

Without waiting for answer she returned to the tent and, seating herself on the couch, began her story.

But in the middle of it she stopped unexpectedly, buried her face in her hands and began to weep aloud.

'What is the matter? What are you crying for, my beloved?' Ab-Ram asked anxiously.

'Your child stirred in my womb, and I am weeping because I shall never see him. Woe be upon my head, woe!'

'Why will you not see your child? You are healthy and strong, the birth will be successful. . . .

'Your wife, Sarai, will take from me the child born of your seed. She will drive your servant Hagar away. Sarai is only waiting for me to bring forth the child in order to drive me out. O, I would rather die before. . . . I would rather I had never known you, Ratach, the light of my eyes. What shall I do? I will go into the wilderness and perish together with the child I bear in my womb.'

'You are talking nonsense. No one will take the child from you.'

She looked at him interrogatively, sidelong, but she did not stop weeping.

'You, my lord, have compassion in your heart for your servant; but in Sarai's heart there is no compassion. Sarai will take my child and will drive me, Hagar. . . .

'I am master, not Sarai. Stop weeping and go on with the story.'

Hagar wiped her eyes and continued, reassured. When she had ended she abruptly asked: ' . . . Are you sure you will not allow my child to be taken from me, my lord?'

'I would no more wrong you than I would wrong my own body. You are mine. . . . Who taught you such beautiful stories?'

'I remember them from my mother's house, from the days when I was not a slave whom anyone can spurn. . . . I know many stories, and I will tell them all one after another to my lord. About the sailor who sailed by the king's orders over the great sea, and whose ship was shattered against an island guarded by a terrible dragon. Or about the valiant Knumhotep, who was wronged by the unworthy Totknaht. . . . But may all thy days be blessed, my lord, because thou wilt not allow thy servant to be wronged.'

It was true that Sarai could hardly possess her soul in patience until the day of Hagar's travail. Of recent times she had grown so aged-looking, it seemed the years that Ab-Ram had lost had been added to her. She went about with a stubborn expression on her face, and two deep furrows ran from her nose to her lips. She hated Hagar, she clenched her teeth, and could hardly bear with the insolent girl until the days of her pregnancy were passed. But then, O then. . . . If the Egyptian woman gave birth to a son Sarai would take it and drive her out. So it had been agreed. Ab-Ram had consented, and so it could not be changed. If Hagar gave birth to a daughter she and her child would be sent away. Sarai would sell the slave for next to nothing, she would give her away, she would simply turn her out, that her eyes might no longer see the woman who had robbed her of her husband.

Sarai's pain and anger were all the more oppressive to her because she had no one to whom she could complain. Noa nodded her head in a manner which clearly said: 'I warned you, my dove, you yourself wanted it. . . .' Eliezer sighed: 'I asked my lady to seek another wife. . . .' They were both right. A second wife had clearly defined rights and duties, in the women's household she occupied a place prescribed by custom. She must obey the first wife and be subject to her. She would not break up the family by her presence, as this abject snake, this bitch, this foreign concubine had done. Q, why had Sarai not listened to the wise counsels?

'Only wait till the child is born . . . only wait. . . .' she repeated to herself passionately; but even so, anxiety grew in her heart as she wondered whether driving the bondwoman away would suffice to restore the former relations between herself and her husband. For Ab-Ram was changed. Ab-Ram, her husband, whom she had known ever since childhood, had become a different, a strange man. Of necessity he devoted odd moments to his wife, but he spent all the rest of his time at Hagar's side. At first he had pretended that it was because of his anxiety that the child should be quickened but now he made no attempt at pretence at all. He wanted it like that, and there was no more to be said. Once Sarai had grieved because Ab-Ram, absorbed in thoughts of his extraordinary god, had lived as though bewitched, indifferent to everything about him. What would she not have given for those times to return.

The night was fine, and moonless, so the stars sparkled all the more brightly in the translucent darkness of the sky. On such a night in past

days Ab-Ram had readily sat until late at night outside the tent, insensitive to his wife's calls, and gazing at the stars. On such a night she had seen him conversing with spirits. What was he doing now? Was he asleep, or was he gazing as in past days at the sky? Unable to suppress her bitter yearning, Sarai crept quietly up to Hagar's tent. She stole along silently. The camp was pitched permanently, for Ab-Ram had no intention of wandering further. A torrent invisible in the darkness gushed in thin streams of water over the stones. The half-withered grass gave off a bitter scent. The autumn rains should begin any day now. Inseparable from the darkness, the jackals were howling in the bushes. Rare, stunted, grotesque oaks cast their shadows over the ground. In their shade Sarai crept very close to her rival's tent and stood still, holding her breath. Ab-Ram was seated on the ground, gazing at the stars; but at his side, all her body nestling against his, was Hagar. He embraced her and asked: 'What?' Sarai would have to go still closer before she could hear. At the thought that someone might unexpectedly approach and see her listening to her husband's conversation with a concubine she was seized with so deep a shame that she hastily turned back. Tears streamed down her pallid cheeks.

Hagar was saying:

'My father, who was a scribe, told me that that star (you see it, my lord?) that one brightest of all, is the eye of the god Gad, to whom the priests offer laden tables in order to win his favour. . . .'

'In Ur they call it Nimrud,' Ab-Ram commented.

'And that one, that is the goddess Isida. . . .'

'In Ur it is called Ishtar.'

'I expect it is the same. The goddess of love. Your goddess and mine.'

'I do not believe in the god Gad nor in the goddess Isida. The Lord, the Almighty God, is one. . . .'

With a laugh she put her hand over his lips:

'I know, I know that story. I have heard you telling of your god. No one has ever seen him, he has no features, he hasn't even a name. . . . What sort of a god is he?'

'It's a waste of time talking to you; women do not understand such matters,' he answered jokingly. He did not want to discuss this subject with her; it was as though he were afraid she would prove the stronger in the argument.

'In the temple,' Hagar persisted, 'I saw a statue which replied to the

priests' questions. It had a roaring voice, and in their fear the people fell to the ground. But have you ever heard your god?

'I will not talk with you about Him,' he said, overcome by a feeling of incomprehensible shame.

'You are right, my lord, as beautiful as the rising moon. For he has abandoned you. . . . Everybody says it is because you were sparing with your sacrifices to him. . . . The gods are greedy. . . .'

'I have said that I do not want you to speak of Him.' He tried to rise. She clung to him with her arm.

'Rameh, grant one favour to your most humble servant. Allow your slave to speak of the goddess Isida, whom you call Ishtar. She is the mother of fertility and the guardian of women with child. . . . Do you wish to have a son, my lord?'

'I want you to bear me a son. I want to have an heir in my old age.'

'Then make an offering to the goddess Isida. Seven lambs. . . .'

'I will not.'

'Do you regret giving seven yearlings?'

'I would give a hundred sheep for your safe delivery, but I will not make an offering to the goddess. . . .'

'Then whom will you make it to?' she asked angrily.

He made no reply, for the remark touched him to the quick. Indeed, to whom should he make an offering? Whose was he? On whom could he call in his time of trouble? The Lord had departed from him. He did not believe in the gods. He did not even possess teraphim. He was alone. Alone in the presence of all the powers of earth and heaven.

And for the first time this woman's body, which had aroused his desire, seemed a frail and passing shelter which he would at any moment be compelled to leave, in order to stand eye to eye with the terrible, the dread reality.

His realisation pierced his bowels, but it only quickened his desire. He moved closer to the bondswoman. She embraced him amorously, looking provocatively into his eyes.

'You are not afraid that to-day is the thirteenth day of the month?' she asked. 'They say that any man who has intercourse with a woman on that day loses his manhood.'

'So they say, truly; but how do you know today is the thirteenth day?'

'I count the mornings from each new moon so that I may bear your son at a propitious hour. . . .'

'I will not sleep on your bosom today,' he decided, and added: 'The child will not submit to your will, even though you indicate the day to him.'

She rested her face on her hands, and gazed thoughtfully into the darkness.

'He will listen to me,' she declared. 'If he begins to kick and struggle on a bad night when the moon is hidden I shall close myself and hold my breath and not let him come forth until the new day has dawned.'

'Of a truth, Hagar,' he admitted, 'I have never met another woman like you.'

She smiled painfully.

'What are those words to me when my lord refuses to make an offering to the goddess? I desire with a great desire that my son should shine like Shamash, should glitter like Sin, should be as strong as a bull, as pure as water, as white as cream. . . . In vain do I desire. The gods will not bestow these gifts on him if they do not receive offerings. . . . Of a truth, they will cause him to have six fingers on his hands, or two left feet, or slanting eyes. . . .'

She burst into tears, and Ab-Ram vainly tried to calm her.

'Make an offering,' she sobbed.

'Do understand that I cannot. . . . I do not believe in the goddess.'

'What does that matter? Slaughter a sheep, my lord, and the goddess will feel satisfied. Do the gods ask whether men believe in them?'

'I will think it over, and see,' he promised at last, bored by her tears.

The quarrel between Sarai and Hagar came to a head over such a trifling matter that, if either woman had been asked, she would have been unable to say what it was. Perhaps the cause was an unwashed pot, or perhaps a rag thrown away. . . . Any cause was good enough to open a vent for the hatred gathering within them. Sarai's hatred was the deeper, for she had justice on her side; Hagar's was the more violent, for it had long been suppressed. They measured each other with flaming eyes, ready to spring at each other's faces.

'You miserable slave!' Sarai hissed. 'If you were not with child I would order you to be put in shackles.'

'I am not your slave!'

'You are! You are!'

'I am not, for I am bearing a son to my lord.'

'A son? You will bring forth a blind, hunchbacked and crippled daughter!'

Hagar laughed provocatively:

'I shall bear a son. A fortune-teller in Egypt prophesied that to me.'

'The son will be mine, not yours!'

'Do you covet my son, you barren old woman? You yourself have not given birth even to a blind whelp; and you want my son!'

Sarai went white with fury.

'You snake!' she cried. 'You carrion! You dog's vomit! As soon as you have had your child I shall brand your forehead and whip you. I shall whip you myself.'

'You just try!'

Hagar set her fists on her hips as though preparing for a fight. Noa, fearing for the child, ran to look for Ab-Ram. He came quickly, accompanied by Eliezer.

'What are you doing?' he asked sharply, in his old, resolute tones. 'Has a demon enslaved you both, has the sun addled your brains?'

But the two women were so blind with fury that even their lord's voice did not constrain their anger. They spat at each other, snarling. Ab-Ram seized them by the arms and shook them violently.

'Still your bewitched tongues at once,' he shouted. 'Enough of this! What is it all about?'

They did not answer. What was the point of answering such a question? Ab-Ram knew quite well what it was all about. Ostentatiously holding her belly, Hagar fell to her knees. Sarai stood arrogant, erect, not lowering her eyes before her husband's furious gaze. Involuntarily Ab-Ram felt embarrassed, and he decided to settle the matter once for all.

'My soul cannot endure wrangles,' he declared. 'My eyes do not wish to see nor my ears hear your squabbling. From now on you will not see each other. Eliezer, let your wife Resa wait on the pregnant Hagar and cook for her.'

'Both I and my wife are your servants, Ab-Ram,' Eliezer replied without enthusiasm. Nor did either of the two women appear to be satisfied. Sarai certainly was not, for the slave had not been rebuked; Hagar was not, because she had taken great pleasure in issuing orders in her mistress's tent and giving commands to old Noa. So Ab-Ram's decision did not subdue the storm.

'My wrong be upon thee!' Sarai said proudly to Ab-Ram. 'I have given

my bondwoman to your bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived I was despised in her eyes.'

'I am the servant of my lord,' Hagar began to sob desperately. 'I am not Sarai's servant. My lord will not take my son from me. So my lord has promised me.'

Sarai, Noa, and Eliezer all fixed their eyes on Ab-Ram expectantly. He was silent, overwhelmed by the impotence of a man compelled to decide between two wrangling women, one of whom was making the demand, while the other had right on her side. He wanted to satisfy Hagar, but his innate sense of justice did not permit him to wrong Sarai.

'Your maid, Hagar, is in your hands, Sarai,' he forced himself to say at last. 'But remember that she is with child, and deal gently with her. I have said that you are not to see each other until her delivery is past. I shall myself decide as I will about my child.'

'I will not hand the child over to anyone,' Hagar screamed wildly.

She had gone too far. Ab-Ram realised that if he yielded now he would lose all his tribal authority.

'You are a slave, and you will do as I command you.'

Without a word Hagar rushed as though demented from the tent. Ab-Ram had difficulty in restraining himself from rushing after her. Sarai gave him a grateful look. He thrust her off with an angry glance.

'Eliezer,' he ordered, 'follow the bondwoman Hagar and conduct her to her tent.'

The old servant bowed and ran off. Ab-Ram strode about the tent, trying to calm himself. Sarai and Noa silently returned to the sorting of lentils, which the quarrel had interrupted. The smooth, flat grains ran through their hands with a dry rustle. They all waited a long time. At last Eliezer returned out of breath.

'O, my lord! She is mad! The demon with the evil eye, ~~Sedu~~, has entered into her. When I went up to her she said she would thrust a knife into herself - and she had a knife in her hand. She said she was going to Gaza to sell herself in the market. I returned for you to saddle a camel and overtake her. . . . She will listen to you. . . .'

'A camel! Swiftly!' Ab-Ram shouted. His hands trembled with anger and anxiety. He gave the two women a furious look. Bent over their work, they obstinately held their peace. If it had not been for the child, how gladly would he have received the news that Hagar had fled! Truly,

the law strictly forbade the purchase of a runaway slave of either sex, and if the runaway were found he or she was branded, while the purchaser paid a heavy fine. None the less, this forbidden trade was widely spread. And if the frenzied Egyptian woman carried out her threat Ab-Ram's son, his future heir, would be born into slavery.

Sur ran up, leading a camel. Ab-Ram mounted it, with Eliezer behind him, and they rode hard in the direction of Gaza.

Despite what she had said to Eliezer, as soon as the camp was out of sight Hagar turned away from Gaza eastward, making for a rocky elevation overgrown with sparse prickly plants. It was a wilderness unvisited by herds, for the grass was withered and burnt. Her anger lent her strength. She walked swiftly, and soon reached the top. Through the undergrowth she could see the camp spread out over the valley, along the stream; the smoke from the camp fires columned upward. A cloud of dust on the road attracted her attention. She recognised a speeding camel, with two human forms on its back, and guessed that one of them was Ab-Ram riding out to look for her. She clenched her fists with spite. Let him seek, let him ride as far as Gaza. He would never find his lover, the mother of his unborn child. He had humiliated her, and so had lost her for ever. Hagar would never return, she would lose herself in this wilderness, she would die of hunger, a lion would rend her limb from limb, but on no account would she return. That would be good for Ab-Ram. Let his soul drown in sorrow! Let him know too late what he had lost!

She walked straight ahead, determined only to get as far from the camp as possible, and her anger grew within her as she pitied herself the more. She choked with hatred for Sarai. She regretted that she was not the witch *kasappu*, whose spittle was poisonous. She had spat upon Ab-Ram's wife, and if she had been the witch Sarai would be dead already. She muttered a curse to herself:

'I summon you, ye gods, against this woman! Gods of the night and the day, of the morn and eventide. Harken to my prayer! May she perish, but let me live! May the wind scatter her anger and her bones! May I shine like an emerald, like a diamond! May she have salt always on her lips! May she be eaten up with lice, may she lack water, may her lips rustle like a dry leaf in the desert.'

Muttering the curse eased her for a while. Then she again began to feel

sorry for herself and the child stirring in her womb, which would perish with her.

How should she call this son, so much desired? Ab-Ram would give him a Hebrew name, hard and unlovely: Terah, Nahor, or Sarug. He would never ask her, the mother, her opinion. Of a truth, she did not remember what her own father's name was. The memory of her, lot as a bondswoman inflamed her anger again. She desired that her son should live, should be Ab-Ram's heir, and should avenge her. After his father's death he would drive out Sarai and set Hagar in her place in the tent. Sarai would plead for mercy. This picture delighted her so much that it overcame her previous desire to perish in the wilderness in order to spite Ab-Ram. Now she decided she would live and rear the child. She thought that the fruit of her womb must be savage and menacing. He would arouse fear in others, but he would never be the servant of others. . . . He would be the lord of his own will. He would enslave and humiliate others, because his mother had been a bondswoman. I would call him, *Dib*, the wolf, she thought, that he may bite everybody, like a wolf. I would call him *Dob*, the bear, that he may be as terrible as a female bear, a *sakkul* that has been deprived of her young. I would call him *Zaal* - anger - I would call him *Ismailu*, the Voice of my Suffering.

She walked along deep in thought, not noticing where she was going. Bushes with long sharp thorns barred her road, she turned haphazardly to left or right. The sound of water splashing over stones drew her attention. Going towards the sound, she descried a spring pouring out from a cliff and running down in a slender stream. She sat down on a stone by the water, only now realising how weary she was. She drank, she washed her inflamed face, and began to think more coolly. Around her was a silence that the quiet purling of the stream made all the more expressive. In that quietness, at any moment she might hear the soft padding footfalls of a lion or leopard coming down to drink. They would see her and devour her together with all her hopes of vengeance. Now she was seized with fear, she cursed herself for wandering out into this wilderness. Much would she gain from Ab-Ram's despair, when a lion had killed her. And perhaps no one would ever find her scattered bones, no one would ever discover what had happened to her. Instead of annoying she would only comfort Sarai. . . . Woe! Woe!

Standing motionless, disabled with fear, she heard cautious steps and rustlings all round her. She imagined that these sounds were caused by

demons. Had she forgotten that a guardian demon dwelt beside every spring? Perhaps, when she had sat down unheeding on the stone without first protecting herself with an adjuration, she had occupied his favourite spot. Her former fear was replaced by horror. All else grew insignificant, unimportant. Even her hatred for Sarai, even the humiliation she had suffered from Ab-Ram, even the leopard, even the lion. . . . In her mind's eye she saw the hideous figures of demons with the talons of a vulture, the tail of a snake, the head of a sphinx, and the body of a leopard, which she had seen depicted on the walls of the temple at Ur. They were the *uttuki*, who dwell in hills, valleys, and graves! She recalled the witch *Labartu* who lies in wait for pregnant women in order to tear their young from them and put her own seed in its place. *Labartu* had the head of a lion, the teeth of an ass; her voice was more terrible than a storm. The terrified woman thought she could hear the monster's steps. The wilderness all round her was swarming with innumerable hideous forms, derisive and malevolent. She had nothing with which to protect herself against them. The powers of the beneficent demons are not to compare with those of the malevolent demons, so it was useless to call on them. Overcome by a delirious fear, Hagar turned and fled. She fled blindly, howling with terror, compelled only by the one desire: to return to the camp. To the camp, to the tent, to old Noa, even to Sarai - anything to be among human beings again. The thorns caught her robe as she ran, and she believed the witches were already clutching at her. In her panic she forgot that the slender stream would be the best of guides, for without doubt it flowed by the shortest way down into the valley; and she wandered senselessly among the bushes. She stumbled, she fell; she picked herself up and ran on again. She wandered about for a long time. At last, through the undergrowth she saw the smoke of the camp fires. As if this very sight possessed the magic of safety, dictated the bounds to the fiends, her fear left her. She breathed more easily. Cautiously descending the steep slope into the valley, she considered what reason she should give for her return. Not for anything would she admit that she had returned of her own choice, driven by elemental fear. She would say she had fallen in with spirits, and the spirits had commanded her to return.

She smiled to herself. Now she had thought of a splendid idea! It would enslave Ab-Ram once for all. And Sarai would not dare to open her lips against her. She reached the valley and, despite her weariness, held herself

erect, scornful. She was met by Mosa and Sur, one of the many little groups who had been sent out to look for her.

Ab-Ram had returned from his fruitless pursuit, and was standing outside his tent. The sight of his changed face made Hagar realise how great was the power she possessed over him. When he saw her he raised both hands above his head joyfully.

'Here she is! Here she is!' he shouted. 'She has returned. Seek no more. My affliction has passed, for Hagar has returned.'

He seized her by the arm.

'I rode after you like a madman,' he confessed. 'Where have you been?' She tried to conceal the satisfaction his welcome gave her.

'I went off into a lofty wilderness, my lord,' she explained. 'I wished to kill myself together with the child I bear, so that I might no longer endure these torments. I waited for a lion to devour me. . . . I came back because your god commanded me to return.'

He started back, deeply moved.

'My God?' he stammered. 'He spoke to you?'

'He spoke, and I saw him.'

He shook his head, disillusioned.

'You could not see Him. He has no features'

'I saw him,' she insisted.

'Perhaps He sent His angel to you.'

'Yes, yes; it was an angel,' she readily agreed.

He set both hands on her shoulders, and gazed into her eyes until she was confused and turned her face away.

'Tell me,' he demanded, 'tell me; what did he look like?'

This question, too, was unexpected. She drooped her head.

'I did not dare to look,' she explained 'I saw him only from behind. . . . He had already passed. . . . He was great. . . .'

'He spoke to you?'

'O yes. He spoke to your servant, Ab-Ram'

'What did he say?' he exclaimed.

She breathed more easily, for she had prepared her answer to this question.

'The angel said: "Return to your lord Ab-Ram, submit yourself to his hands. You will bear a son whom you will name Ishmael, the Voice of your Suffering, because the Lord has heard your affliction. . . ." They

were the words of the angel. He revealed himself to me beside a fountain springing in the wilderness. And I returned in order to serve you, forgetting that you have been unkind to me. . . .⁶

Ab-Ram stood motionless, speechless.

'Repeat the Angel's words again,' he said in a softer tone. 'Repeat the message which the Lord commanded you to bring.'

Delighted with the impression she had made, she retold her story again. He sat down heavily on the ground, like a man with sunstroke, and his head sank on to his breast. He was silent.

'I am tired,' Hagar sighed. That at least was the truth. She could hardly remain on her feet.

Her reproach penetrated into his mind. He got up; and the others were astonished to see tears running down his cheeks.

'Go and rest, Hagar,' he said gently. 'Resa will bring you food and wash your feet. Go and rest. Blessings be on your head for the news you have brought me.'

She went to her tent disillusioned, for she had thought that he would accompany her. She had hoped for that consummation in order to annoy Sarai, and she looked back at him again and again. Preoccupied with the news he had just heard, he did not notice her glances. He wanted to be alone in order to ponder on the message. He walked out beyond the camp, and in search of solitude he unwittingly took the very path which Hagar had taken in her anger. He did not doubt that the Egyptian woman was speaking the truth. He himself never lied, and he found it difficult to conceive that others could lie. Nor did he see any reason why the bond-woman should lie, for he had no knowledge of the love which is peculiar to woman. He could well believe that she had seen the Angel of the Lord, who had commanded her to return. So the Lord had not forgotten His servant. He still remembered him, still watched over his seed. Ab-Ram's heart was deeply moved by a feeling akin to burning shame. So the Creator had performed, but how had the creature repaid him? In his past lamentations (and even these had been dropped of late), that he had offended the Lord and lost His favour there had been a note of resentment with God, of human complaint. 'Thou didst call me, Thou didst pronounce words of blessing in plenty, and Thou hast neglected to perform them, until at last I felt. . . .' Confirmed in the conviction that the Lord had abandoned him, he had ceased to listen to His voice, to seek the Lord though He was angry. For where there is withdrawal, indifference follows.

He halted on a slope, and looked about him. He did not see the valley but his own life, all his deeds of the past year. They seemed infamous to him, and he was stunned. For he had lived like an unreasoning animal, empty of all thought except that of voluptuous pleasure with a woman.

He recalled the indecent practices which Hagar had taught him, and to which he had yielded readily, avid for more. A demon of lust had dwelt in his body, had taken complete possession of him. The shame he felt now was similar to Adam's feelings when he hid before God, saying: 'I am naked.' For there are unclean creatures, like the hedgehog, the hoopoe, the hare, the pig, the bat, the owl, the vulture, the weasel, the mouse, the salamander, crocodile, and others. All carrion was unclean. And a man who has touched any carrion, or someone sick of leprosy, or of an issue of blood, laying bare his body to the sickness, is also unclean. But now, at this moment of reckoning with himself Ab-Ram realised that there is an uncleanness which is more oppressive than all these, more polluting to a man than if he had relations with a corpse. There is the uncleanness of a heart so entangled in fleshy delight that he can think of nothing else. He felt abased and loathsome. The Lord had called him. The old sage, Nergal-Sar, had entrusted a secret to him and had said with confidence: 'Now I can die.' He had given his own cloak to a strange shepherd, believing that that shepherd would carry on the secret treasure and courageously reveal it to the world. Sep-Sin had voluntarily suffered a terrible death in order to save him, A-Ram, the possessor of the Truth. Indeed he had perished in vain, for the Hebrew had achieved nothing. On the contrary, he had affronted the Lord, he had forgotten Him.

But the Lord was watching. Like a hunter lying in wait for a wild bull, He was watching what the unfaithful one was doing, and He was waiting.

Now he was filled with pain at his own unworthiness, and with gratitude and adoration for the Lord. Never, not even in those happy times when he had thought himself very close to God, had he worshipped and loved Him more fervently. He desired that he might become as dust under His feet, that he might vanish so that only the Lord was left, that he might know nothing, feel nothing, except the blessed consciousness that the Lord is.

He heard water splashing musically over stones. A spring! Without doubt the one beside which Hagar had seen the divine messenger, the

everliving One, pass by. Let this spring henceforth be known as Beer-lahai-roi: I saw the Living One, and live.

He knelt down and rested his forehead on a stone. To the vengeful Hagar this spot had been filled with horrible monsters; but to Ab-Ram it was full of light and grace.

But delusive and transient is peace in the heart of man. Although the shock Ab-Ram had suffered swept out of his mind all that was not of the Lord, when he returned to his tent late that evening, and meditated in the encircling gloom over the incident, he realised that he could no longer go on in the old way with Hagar. His body throbbled with regret; and out of that regret revolt was born. Why must he put his concubine out of his life? What evil was there in intercourse with a woman? Incited by opposition, his desire grew all the more, the more he told himself: 'You will not go to her!' Only now did he begin to understand the meaning of Nergal-Sar's enigmatic remark that internal discord was a human characteristic. In him also two mutually hostile men, two contrary Ab-Rams, were struggling. One called: 'Lord! All is as nothing before Thee!' The other, raging with lust, hissed: 'She is waiting. Go to her, why do you hesitate? Before long your old bones will grow cold, and you will cease to desire carnal bliss. Sate yourself while yet there is time.'

Groaning, streaming with sweat, he tossed on his couch, not knowing what to do. He was the more oppressed because he did not know which of the two conflicting Ab-Rams was his true self. He liked himself first to one, then to the other; and tried to reconcile them by satisfying both. He told himself: 'Perhaps Hagar is weak after her experience. I ought to go and find out how she is, for she is with child.' 'Don't go, don't go!' a second voice called insistently and inexorably. 'It is hot in the tent, I need air. I'll go and have a look at the herds.' 'Don't turn in the direction of your concubine's tent, for you will be unable to resist the temptation.' 'Am I not a grown man? I shall not even look at her tent, but that is the quickest way to the herd.' 'You lie! Do not go in her direction, Ab-Ram!'

He went out. He stood gazing at the sky, and saw it filled with the Lord; but when he looked down he saw the earth as dark as the Egyptian woman's body. Stealing along, he drew near to her tent. The entrance flap was drawn aside. She was waiting for him. He would be wronging the poor child if he did not go to her. . . . For a moment, only for a moment. . . .

A tall figure emerged before him so unexpectedly that he halted as though rooted to the ground.

'I have been seeking you, my lord,' said Yahiel; for it was he. 'Command several men to go out with spears, for a lion is circling and prowling round the herd, and is not to be scared away by our camp fire or shouts. . . .'

'I will go myself and summon others,' Ab-Ram said hurriedly, turning back to his tent for his weapons. 'You did well to come for me.'

The Valley of Siddim

FROM THE TERRACE ON WHICH EDITH WAS RESTING SHE COULD SEE THE green, solid crowns of trees extending as far as the walls of Gomorrah which showed white in the distance, and even further, to the foot of the bare mountain peaks. The mountains lined the valley on three sides: the south, the west, and the east. On the northern side, the waters of the Salt Lake gleamed the colour of lustreless turquoise. In the hot season a white cloud of steam rose above the surface of the lake. The valley of Siddim was also known as 'the forested valley', because of the abundance of the trees growing in it. The merchant, Sarug son of Ephraim, had not exaggerated in praising its beauty. It was like a bouquet of flowers shut away amid cliffs, like an emerald set in stone. The groves which covered much of the valley consisted of myrtle trees with small, perfumed leaves, oaks, olives, arrowing palms, peaches, apricots, nut and mulberry trees. The air was uniformly still and steamy, saturated with sticky humidity, and so was favourable to the growth of vegetation. Nowhere else, not even in flowery Damascus, were the roses that covered the house walls so brilliantly hued and scented. Only here and there amid the green of the grass were there dark, steep-sided, evil-smelling holes, with a black, greasy ooze gleaming in their depths. These were the famous slime pits, which were the prime source of the valley-dwellers' wealth, for they contained hemar, or earth-pitch, a valuable object of trade with Egypt. On the southern verge of the valley the trees were stunted, the grass yellow, scorched by the proximity of burning springs which spouted high into the air. The water they flung up stank like rotten eggs. It was supposed that they had been poisoned by unusually malevolent demons.

The earth-pitch was obtained not only from the wells scattered about the valley. Every year, when the spring floodwaters of the river Jordan falling into the lake from the north, disturbed the heavy, lye-saturated

water, numerous porous blocks were carried along on the surface, and were easily hauled on to the banks. At this one season the dwellers in the valley sailed out in boats over the motionless depths, in which neither fish nor any other living creature could exist. The depths were unfathomable, and it was generally said that the surface was nearer to heaven than to the lake bottom. And the old story, as old as the Flood, was told that here fire had once burst out of the rocks, and the hot springs and pitch-wells had been left to testify to those fires now sealed in the bowels of the earth. But why should these old women's legends be remembered by the inhabitants of that green, shady paradise, filled with fruit, flowers, and singing birds?

Sodom, the largest of the five cities lying in that valley, stood on the southern shore of the lake. On the lake side it was without walls. There the ramparts were replaced by the rocks, known as the Gate of the Threshold, through which the lake water made its way. During floodwater the surface gleamed immediately behind the rocks, at the same level as the streets. Lower down the valley were Gomorrah, Seboim, and Admah. Only the little town called Zoar stood out, on a high, rocky cape that thrust into the water from the western shore of the lake.

The low walls of the cities were more for ornament than defence. Their true defensive wall was formed by the mountain peaks which enclosed the valley on three sides. Some twelve years before, Kudur-Lagamar, or Chedorlaom, king of Elam, had pierced through the apparently inaccessible passes, and had occupied the valley without a struggle. The Elamites were not a cruel people, and Kudur-Lagamar had not destroyed the flourishing prosperity of the valley (as the Assyrians would undoubtedly have done) but had contented himself with imposing a large tribute. This vassal tribute was a profound humiliation to the five cities, and so, at the news that Hammurabi, king of Babylon, had conquered Elam, it was decided not to continue paying it. This decision was taken at a great council of the kings: Bera, king of Sodom, Birsha, king of Gomorrah, Shinab, king of Admah, Shemeber, king of Seboim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar. Bera, king of Sodom, was the chief among these, being the oldest in seniority. The high priest El-Gad, who was present at the council, advised against taking any resolute step. In his view it was desirable to humble themselves before the Babylonian, and to ask him for a reduction in the tribute. 'If he agrees,' the high priest explained,

'in a year or two we will ask him to remit the tribute altogether. It is better to stroke a lion than to tickle him.'

This was a prudent speech, but prudence rarely finds acceptance among rulers. The kings decided to cease paying the tribute, and to commemorate the occasion they organised a magnificent spectacle for their subjects. A hundred maddened bulls fought one another in the arena of the newly built circus of Sodom. The sand of the arena and the benches set aside for the spectators were sprinkled with perfumes, the cost of which was equal to one year's tribute. And so the people of the cities enthusiastically extolled the valour and wisdom of their kings. These events had occurred a year or two previously, and gradually the memory of them was fading.

The dusty and road-worn traveller attired in the blue robe of a *baru* seer entered the gate of the populous city of Sodom unobserved by the guards. Taking no notice of the magnificence of the city, he made his way straight to the temple, where he was received with respect and amity, though he had never been there before. The traveller was Namtar-El, a Babylonian priest who had been sent as a messenger to the priests of Sodom.

Seated before the high priest and the more important dignitaries of the temple, he said:

'Hearken to the message which has been entrusted to me: Hammurabi, son of Sin-Muballit, is assembling a mighty army. He has armed all his vassals. In the city of Babylon there is excitement, as on the eve of an expedition. It is crowded with men, camels, and asses.'

'Against whom is the son of Sin-Muballit preparing his expedition?'

'The son of Sin-Muballit desires to rule on both sides of the wilderness. He has learned with great anger that the caravanserais which he has built on the trans-Jordan track, along which the merchants' caravans make their way to Egypt, have been attacked again and again by robbers from the wilderness. The son of Sin-Muballit wishes to traverse with arms the entire track from the city of Ham to Akkaba, and to confirm it in security.'

'Thou hast said, Namtar-El, that Hammurabi has assembled all his vassals. Are then his own troops insufficient to break up the robber tribes?'

'Just are thy words, El-Gad. Hammurabi's forces are sufficient to clear the track and to assure the merchants a peaceful journey for many years to come. But Hammurabi is animated by yet other designs, of which he tells no one. The land on this and the farther side of the Jordan is the refuge of numerous pastoral tribes, such as the accursed sons of Eber, who

are independent of all men. Today they are as unstable as the sand carried by the wind, and if they were to unite they would become a menace to all the great states. They are brave and daring. Some years ago the chief of one of these tribes stole a white cloak from the high priest of the city of Ur, and went off with it in impunity. Hammurabi desires to enyoke the scattered tribes before they become a force. You go to catch the leopard in a net while it is still a kitten, not when it has grown its claws and teeth.'

The high priest listened to the traveller closely:

'Thou hast made a long journey, Namtar-El, in order to inform us of this. Why? We do not belong to the tribe of Eber, and we have never attacked the Babylonian's caravanserais.'

'Hammurabi has assembled all his vassals. With him will be Arioch and Rim-Sin of Larsa, Gudhalia the Hittite, and Kudur-Lagamar of Elam. . . .'

'Thou hast said. I have understood.'

There was a silence. The priest, dressed in blue or green robes, pondered on the unfavourable news. The messenger was right, and those who had sent him were farseeing. If Kudur-Lagamar were to march victoriously in the vicinity of the valley he would take vengeance on the five cities for their refusal of tribute.

'Perhaps the expedition will not come to pass, or the son of Sin-Muballit will return without reaching our valley,' one of the younger priests tried to find consolation.

'The son of Sin-Muballit has the support of the gods, and he has never yet turned back before achieving his purpose.'

There was a further silence.

'When does Hammurabi intend to set out?' the high priest asked the pointed question.

'The expedition may set out within a year.'

'Blessed be all thy days, Namtar-El. Blessings be on him who sent thee. Thanks to thee Bera son of Henos has time in which to repair his error.'

The visitor did not remain long; having carried through his mission, he set off on the return journey. At the gate of the city he passed Lot, son of Haran, and his wife, Edith, riding into Sodom.

A few days later the city was filled with rumours of a particularly ill-boding omen which had alarmed even the high priest. The child in a pregnant woman's womb had cried aloud. The woman had been killed,

the child burnt; but the menacing augury was not cancelled thereby. When, to crown the evil, it happened that a herd of boars was terrified by leopards out of the surrounding forest and entered within the city walls, reaching as far as the square before the temple, no one doubted that unknown disasters threatened Sodom. After taking counsel of the gods, the high priest El-Gad decided to warn the king of the evil omens, and to advise him how to avert the danger.

But Bera son of Henos, a corpulent man with the features of a profligate and drunkard, was not alarmed, as he should have been, by the omens. He had taken offence at the high priest for depriving him of his favourite, a handsome youngster. It was said that the gods had carried him off, but the king knew that his coveted beautiful boy was in the high priest's dwelling. From El-Gad's very first words he deduced that the object was to extort the tribute, and decided not to let himself be intimidated. Without doubt Kudur-Lagamar had promised the temple foxes a munificent reward for their mediation.

'A child cried out in its mother's womb?' he repeated with hypocritical horror. 'Wild boars penetrated the city as far as the square before the temple?'

'That is so, favourite of the gods.'

'Menacing signs! I remember it was said of one city that a bitch whelped in the hall of thrones, and a woman gave birth to a child with teeth. I don't know what happened to that city afterward.'

'Favourite of the gods! Of a surety no trace was left of that city. Such omens do not err. . . .'

The king hiccupped noisily with excess of wine. His little eyes, wreathed in fat, glittered cunningly.

'Wait a moment, for I have not told all. After the evil omens came happy ones. A sheep gave birth to a lion's cub. Tell me what that means, you who know the will of the gods.'

Taken by surprise, the high priest stared at him.

'A sheep gave birth to a lion?' he drawled. 'O king, such an omen without doubt cancelled all the previous evil omens. Lions born to sheep signify lasting glory to the monarchy, and prosperity for the people.'

'Then know that that happened among my flock only yesterday. A sheep gave birth to a lion.'

'By the great goddess Targata! Where is it! Favourite of the gods, where is it?'

'Unfortunately, hardly had it been noticed when a lioness came from the forest and carried away the cub as her own, and in her anger devoured the sheep. . . .'

The high priest looked coldly into his ruler's befuddled eyes.

'What do you think of that omen?' the king insisted.

The priest did not reply. Without a word he rose and went to the entrance. At the threshold he carefully shook his sandals free of dust, and slammed the door behind him.

The king, satisfied, went on hiccupping.

At that moment a servant entered and informed the king of the arrival of Lot son of Haran, of the tribe of the sons of Eber, to make his obeisance and offer gifts. The king ordered that Lot was to be presented to him.

Lot, who formerly had been so ready for novelty of all kinds, was depressed; he already regretted parting from his uncle. But his wife, Edith, was radiant. She felt that she had reached the height of her ambition. She would live and shine in this beautiful city, not with shepherds or among flocks and herds. Lot did not even notice when his wife took over command of their life, so feeble had been his own control. She had persuaded him to make his obeisance to the king, she had chosen suitable gifts, now she angrily tugged at his robe to indicate that he was to fall three times on his face. To Lot's surprise and chagrin, before he could open his mouth she was answering the questions the king asked.

Unlike the Hebrew, Bera son of Henos did not seem astonished at her conduct. In this country the women were of great importance, and had a voice in all matters.

The king assigned Lot a considerable stretch of meadow for pasturage, and empowered him to buy a house in the city. Edith ascribed this favour to her own charms, but in reality it was due to other impulses. The high priest's visit had left a grain of anxiety in the king's mind. If the cursed soothsayer had arrived some two hours later, when the head of the favourite of the gods was clearer of the fumes of wine, their conversation would certainly have taken a different course. He should have sounded the old temple fox, to discover what it was all about. Was the city really threatened with some danger? Now it was too late. El-Gad was obstinate. He would never forget the insult. A sheep which had given birth to a lion. . . . He-he. . . . The king also recalled a prophecy which said the time would come when the Sodomites would regret that their couches were not of stones and their attire of mud. Perhaps that day was now

approaching, and an unknown enemy was already climbing the hills? The subjects of Bera son of Henos were effeminate fops with soft white hands, and of no use in battle, and this explained his friendly welcome of the Hebrew with weatherbeaten complexion and broad shoulders. By showing him favour the king hoped to get him to bring more men of the same tribe to Sodom.

Lot and his wife noticed that the palaces and temples of Sodom were built in a style different from any they had seen previously, and they thought them the most beautiful in the world. They knew the Chaldean methods of construction, and recently they had seen the Egyptian methods; but these of Sodom were not like either of those. The style, distinguished by its lightness and grace, had been brought from the distant, and, to the Hebrews, unknown island of Crete, which maintained lively relations with the cities of the valley. The raw material was stone quarried in the neighbouring mountains. The separate pieces of rock were cemented together with asphalt. The buildings contained magnificent collections of the most valuable productions of Crete, Babylon, and Egypt. The flat roofs glittered with gilded balustrades. Gold shone on the bronze gates of the city entrances.

The temples of Sodom were devoted to the god Beese who had the form of a hideous dwarf, with a great head crowned with feathers, shaggy, protruding ears, a short neck, and powerful shoulders. A short skirt embroidered with gold revealed thick thighs and genitals which, like the head, were of an exaggerated size. The honour in which he was held found expression in the Sodomites' profligacy and their sacrifices of children. Even Edith, who was not affected by anything, which did not directly concern her, shivered with horror when she first heard the piercing scream of infants flung alive into the fire flaming before the god's image.

The dwarf Beese was known in Chaldaea, where he bore the name of Izdubar; but the goddess Targata, entwined with serpents, was new to them. In reality she was the same as Ishtar and Isida, the fruitful, cruel, and passionate goddesses of Chaldaea and Egypt, though she was called Targata in Sodom and Astarte in the coastal cities of Tyre and Surri.

In addition to these two gods, two horses, a white mare and a bay stallion, were kept in the main temple, and the Sodomites held them in especial esteem. They were regarded as mighty demons who were the city's guardians. The Sodomites also worshipped certain kinds of trees,

and as the Hebrew and his wife were leaving the royal palace they saw a solemn procession passing round the grove in the centre of the square. A jangling music beat out a dizzily rapid rhythm. Men and women were dancing to its tempo, in their dance going through the motions of amatory intercourse. The excited dancers tore pieces of their gowns away bit by bit, as the wind strips leaves from trees, and threw them down, until at last they were dancing completely naked, with only a circlet round their thighs. This, too, they tore off, and then they ran to huddle immodestly against the trees. Lot felt so ashamed that he hardly knew where to look. But Edith dilated her nostrils and unconsciously hastened her steps, as though she were hurrying to take part in the ceremony. When the crowd began to swarm and mingle under the trees Lot forcibly dragged her away from the disgusting sight. They turned into a side street, which was filled with gaily-dressed idlers. Edith forgot her annoyance as she stared enviously at the women's attire, at their robes of Cretan cut, adorned all over with golden spangles, which changed colour and clashed like a snake-skin. The men were just as brilliantly dressed as the women, wore jewels, and painted their cheeks and lips. Both sexes seemed to be dressed only in order to display their nakedness the more expressively. The women's robes were in numerous folds, and were slashed from the waist downward, swinging open to lay bare all the body at every step.

The joy Edith knew during the first few days of her stay in Sodom was shortlived, and now she was sitting on the terrace of her beautiful house, ill-tempered and sulky. Sella hovered close by, anticipating her lady's wishes and trying to dispel her anger by the fervour of her service. Of recent days the lighthearted Sella had grown miserable, and was pining. In the beautiful city of Sodom the masters and mistresses lived well, but the servants very ill. In the pastoral life to which Sella had been accustomed the difference between a slave and the head of the tribe consisted, to tell the truth, only in the degree of obedience and respect. Apart from that everything was the same: the couch, and the attire. They ate from the same dish, they had the same occupations. But in Sodom the situation was very different. For while some were swimming in luxury others had to live in great need. People who do not have to work always demand too much of others. From the shores of the Great Sea to the mountains of Elam, from Egypt to Haran, there were no masters so inhuman as the Sodomites.

Sella's affability and fawning servility were without effect. Edith's ill temper had deeper causes, and the girl could not dispel it. In a few moments a servant was to arrive from the temple, bringing two new robes for sale; but that morning the booby and simpleton Lot, the shepherd, had informed his wife that he had no more silver or gold. To prove his sincerity he had shaken out the leather wallet in which his father Haran had kept the gold. In every pastoral family, the stores of precious metal accumulated through the generations were very rarely drawn on; shepherds had no need of money, except for the purchase of spell tablets and weapons. The gold thus accumulated greatly increased its owner's authority and prestige, and so no one lightly expended his treasure. But now the store of silver and gold coins which Haran son of Terah had thriftily gathered together, and which had been increased by Edith's dowry, had been dispersed in a few months. Not a shekel was left.

That was not surprising. In Sodom gold flowed like water. The house had been purchased with heavy silver mitias, and Lot had paid far more than it was really worth. Then he had had to buy a litter, clothes for Edith, colourful garments for the four shepherds who previously had been dressed in linen and sheepskins, but who now had to be arrayed in finery in order to carry their mistress in her litter. And there had been costly utensils, and a silken curtain to screen the courtyard at noonday. None of these things was cheap. The avaricious Godomites exploited the new arrivals' inexperience, always making them pay more than was just. Edith was afraid they would take her for a simpleton, and she would not allow Lot to chaffer over prices.

'I must have gold, I must have gold,' she told herself, clenching her teeth. In her temper she pushed Sella away and ordered little Lilith, who was jingling her favourite silver crocodile unbearably, to go away. 'I must have gold,' she repeated. 'My days will wither like grass, they will vanish like burnt wood, if I do not get gold.'

There were footsteps on the stairs. The temple servant, Tabirah, whom she had been expecting, came up on to the rose-covered terrace. This woman traded in whatever came to hand; she was a procuress, loathsome and importunate. On her arm she had the robes she wished to sell; bowing to her client, she unwound their canvas wrappings. One gown was green and gold, the other black and purple. They were both so beautiful that Sella was speechless, and Edith turned pale.

'Robes worthy of the gods,' Tabirah declared with satisfaction.

THE VALLEY OF SIDDIM

'Bring them some other day,' Edith forced herself to say the w
How she hated her husband at that moment for exposing her to such humiliation. 'Lot, the son of Haran,' she added in explanation, 'has sent to his uncle, Ab-Ram son of Terah, for the silver he left with him; but the messenger has not yet returned.'

The hideously ugly woman looked black.

'If you have no silver, give me jewels; and when the messenger returns you can have them back. . . .'

'I will not part with my jewels. They came from the king of Egypt, who gave them to me.'

'Sell me your slave,' the old woman nodded at Sella, who shrank away in fear.

Edith shook her head.

'I could not manage without her,' she admitted regretfully.

'Well, in that case . . . ' Tabirah folded up one of the robes. The silk rustled and changed colour in her hands. Edith had tears in her eyes. She felt sure she had never desired anything in all her life so much as these two robes, gold and green, and black and purple.

'Young and beautiful women who go to the priests' couches in order to show their reverence for the gods are given valuable gifts, or gold,' Tibirah muttered listlessly.

'I wonder if they are priests?' Edith thought. But she did not voice her doubts.

'I have long desired to be of service in the temple and to serve the gods,' she said, piously bowing her head.

'Then follow me,' the old woman readily proposed. 'You can take that little one too'; she pointed to Lilith, who was playing in the courtyard.

The Second Call

AB-**RAM** TOOK ONLY THREE MEN WITH HIM: YAHIEL, BLIND IGAL, AND Sur. He left Eliezer in charge of the camp. When he could no longer see the smoke from the camp fires he had a feeling of freedom such as he had not known for many months. He recalled the departure from Ur, and the joyous certainty he had felt that when he had gained his freedom he would proclaim the glory of the True Lord. How confident and strong he had been then; how firmly he had believed that he would be able to carry out all he intended.

The present journey had a definite object. He had long since abandoned all intention of further wanderings to north or south, and this decision involved the necessity to find a suitable spot for their permanent camp. The valley in which he had grazed his flocks and herds since their return from Egypt was abundant in grass, for it had the stream flowing through it. But although the water was plentiful in spring, it all but dried up in the summer, even when the spring rains fell copiously. It was obvious that in dry years the valley would be without water. He is a poor shepherd who entrusts his flocks to water that is inconstant. The surest way of securing a water supply was by boring a deep well in the rock, for then the sun would not drink up the water nor the wind scatter it.

As he pondered on this problem, Ab-Ram remembered that his dead father, Terah son of Nahor, had once spoken of a well which he had bored when a young lad in lands belonging to the king of Gerar. Wells were everlasting, and the people usually remembered the name of him who had dug them. But, in case the well had been concealed or forgotten, Ab-Ram took Igal, the water-diviner, with him.

They did not ride on camels, but on patient and nimble-footed asses. A man riding a camel may be a warrior, he may conceal evil designs in his bosom. An ass is used for peaceful pursuits and neighbourly visits.

Ab-Ram, riding at the head, was dressed in Nergal-Sar's white cloak, which he had not worn for many days. He had explained to Sarai that he was afraid of wearing it out with too frequent use; but in reality for a long time he had found it oppressive, for it revived too many memories.

As he rode slowly along he looked about him with pleasure. How beautiful was this land, how healthy and fertile! The wind blowing from the west brought a copious dew from the sea, and in the early morning the earth looked as though a shower of rain had fallen. The wind was gentler than that which blew along the Euphrates, the heat was less oppressive, the trees were more thickly foliated. It was a pleasure to see palms bowed down with the weight of their fruit; vines loaded with bunches of grapes; the fields, and the gardens. This land, called Canaan, belonged to the Hittite, Amorite, and other kings; but, just as on the farther bound of the desert, so here, their rule was limited to the cities and a small surrounding area of cultivated land. The rest of the land was no one's, and nomad pastoral tribes could pitch their tents freely. The country had not yet become densely populated after the great flood, and no one need fear that he would suffer lack of food or pasturage.

Before setting out on his quest Ab-Ram thought it a matter of honour to ride to the royal court at Gerar and there inquire about the well dug by Nahor son of Sarug. The small city was lacking in any kind of magnificence, and was more like a walled encampment than a capital. On his arrival Ab-Ram learned that the king, known as Abimelech (which means: 'my father was a king') had ridden out northward, to accompany his daughter, Princess Batukipa, whom he had given in marriage to a prince of the Mitannites. Ab-Ram was received by the commander of the royal troops, Phicol. Phicol washed the visitor's feet and invited him to his tent. (He dwelt outside the city, saying that it was cooler under canvas than in houses.) He did not know much about the well being a warrior, not a shepherd. But he did remember that in a valley two days' journey to the north there was an old well which strangers were said to have bored. What their names were, he had not heard.

Next morning Ab-Ram set off in the direction Phicol had indicated. The asses moved along tirelessly, dropping down into a valley, then climbing up again. In the evening of the following day they reached a spot where many nomadic tracks intercrossed. They all radiated from a stone frame which showed grey among the grass. A well!

Around it were set moss-grown troughs shaped like kneading troughs,

into which the shepherds and herdmen poured water for their flocks and herds. Lifting the heavy wooden covering from the frame, the Hebrews tied a palm rope to a bucket and lowered it into the depths. They looked at one another in speechless astonishment at the length of the rope they had to pay out before the bucket splashed into the invisible mirror of the water. They drew it up carefully; it was filled with pure, cold water. Though they were thirsty they did not set their lips to it, for they did not yet know who owned the well. If it proved to be the one they were seeking, the first bucketful should be poured out on the ground in honour of their dead forefathers. They did not have to wait long. In the afterglow of the sunset shepherds appeared, driving their flocks to be watered at the well.

As they came up they looked inquisitively at the strangers. Ab-Ram greeted them:

'May your days flow past in health! Whose is this well?'

The half-naked shepherds looked at one another, not knowing how to answer. Seeing their uncertainty, Ab-Ram shook out his robe in front in sign that he had nothing concealed at his bosom, then repeated the question. An older shepherd, a man with a thick, untidy beard, muttered:

'Why do you ask? This well is ours.'

'Did you bore it?' Ab-Ram asked.

'I do not know who dug this well, may his days be praised. He did it for our tribe, which for ages has drawn water here for its flocks and herds. So the well is ours, and no one else has any right to it.'

'He who dug the well has the right, not he who comes and draws water. You do not muzzle the ox when he treads out the corn. I adjure you by fire and water, asking again: know you not who dug this well?'

Another shepherd, Eshcol the Amorite, answered, scratching his head: 'This is a very old well. They say it was dug by the patriarch Noah himself who saved his years from the flood. . . .'

'It is not as you say,' Aner, his younger brother, objected. 'Our fathers called this the well of Nahor, for it was cut in the rock by a stranger of that name. . . .'

Ab-Ram's face lit up.

'Blessed be all thy days! That Nahor, son of Serug, was my grandfather. My father Terah son of Nahor helped him to cut the well in the rock.'

'If it is as you say,' the brothers answered, 'the well is yours.' Give thanks to the gods, for there is not such another well in all the land round about.'

They lowered their buckets into the depths. It was a matter of indifference to them whom the well belonged to: whether to the king or to this stranger. For he would not take it away with him, nor would he draw out all the water, even if he wished. Nor would he forbid access to it, for the ancient, sacred law laid a curse upon anyone who forbade another man water.

The bucket of water Yahiel had drawn was still standing on the well-frame. Ab-Ram reverently picked it up and splashed water in all four directions, in memory of those who, many years before, had bored the rock, and, lining the sides of the hole with stones, had dug deeper and deeper into the ground, until they had reached the spring, the source of the living water which never failed. Gazing into the mossy depths of the well, Ab-Ram called up a picture of his grandfather Nahor, whom he hardly remembered, and of his father. Where was his father's spirit now, and what did he feel? How fleeting is filial memory! Ab-Ram realised with a pang that he thought more and more rarely of his father whom he had left behind in distant, northern Harran, and he was ashamed; for of what worth is a man lacking in filial piety?

Meanwhile, night was falling; but before the shepherds departed they assured the Hebrews that there were no beasts of prey in the valley, so there was no need to light a fire. The asses grazed close at hand. The men ate the cakes brought from the camp, and some dates, and drank cold, perfect water. Wrapped in his cloak, Ab-Ram stretched himself comfortably on the grass, and swiftly fell asleep.

He was suddenly awakened by an indefinable feeling that something important was about to happen. He rose on his elbow, rubbed his eyes, and gazed into the thick darkness. All around was a silence as profound as if the world were holding its breath. The night, normally filled with rustlings, with the sounds of animals and birds, the splash of water, the whisper of leaves and grasses, was silent, as though lurking in expectation or fear. Involuntarily Ab-Ram began to share that fear. His loneliness had left him. If he could have defined his condition he would have said that he was empty, as empty as a leather bag waiting for the breath which will blow it up and fill it out. That he was like an empty vessel ready to receive the life-giving oil. That he was all expectation and anticipatory obedience. He did not know how long he passed in this waiting. He lost

all measure of time. Measure exists only where there is life; but he, and all the world with him, was dead. Until a moment arrived when into the void that was Ab-Ram flowed a mighty roar, as if all the waters of the world had swept down from mountains into an abyss. In this crushing, terrible roar the watcher heard a voice: 'Ab-Ram! Ab-Ram!' The Creator was calling to his creation.

Ab-Ram did not ask as he had once before: 'Who calleth me?' He knew. The awed nothingness that was Ab-Ram replied: 'Here am I, Lord.' And he waited again. He was completely empty of all thought, of all desire, even of anxiety. He remained submissively ready for any sign. Like the eyes of servants, fixed on the hands of their lords, so his heart waited on the voice of the Lord. Like a bird in the hand of a fowler, so his soul quivered with desire to answer readily to the Lord.

The Lord said:

'All the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth. . . . Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them. . . . So shall thy seed be. . . . Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee.'

When Ab-Ram awoke the sun was already high. Sur had lit a fire, and old Igal was warming himself beside it, for he had been chilled during the night with the chill of the earth. Yahiel was examining the asses' hooves and rubbing their dewy flanks with bunches of dry grass. As he looked at this familiar, everyday bustle, Ab-Ram did not know whether that which had happened to him in the night had been a dream or a reality. That terrible voice, filling the circle of the earth like the roar of the sea in a conch shell, and those incomprehensible words – he shivered at the very thought of them. He wanted to go apart from his servants, to recall the entire incident in solitude, but he was hindered by a messenger from Phicol, commander of the king of Gerar's troops, who came with the message: 'Return, son of Terah, for Abimelech has arrived at his city.'

Courtesy commanded that he should not delay, so Ab-Ram, reluctantly enough, set off with his men to return to Gerar. The king, advised of his coming, was waiting for him outside his palace. Except for the gold fillet on his head he was not to be distinguished from an ordinary warrior.

'Is thy coming in peace?' he asked the approaching Ab-Ram.

'In peace,' Ab-Ram assured him, shaking out the front of his garment,

to show that he had no weapon with him. 'May good health attend all thy days, O king. Blessed be all thy days.'

They sat down - Abimelech, Ab-Ram, Phicol, and Igal, the commander and the blind man acting as witnesses - in the main chamber of the royal palace, on sheepskins spread over the floor. Ab-Ram was pleased to see that here simple customs prevailed; for where there is simplicity there is sincerity, and sincerity is the salt of life. They drank wine from goblets, and Ab-Ram presented his cause.

'I know,' the king admitted, 'that the well in the valley is called the Well of Nahor, but I did not know who Nahor was or where he had come from. If you say he is your grandfather, I will not oppose you.'

They both removed the sandals from their feet. With a sandal in his hand Ab-Ram touched Igal's hand, that the blind man might know that an agreement was being concluded. The king did the same. Then he and Ab-Ram exchanged sandals, so concluding an indissoluble agreement concerning the well.

'Far from here, on the further side of the wilderness,' the king said later, when platters of food were brought in, 'Hammurabi, son of Sin-Muballit, who reigns over half the world, has introduced new customs. Every agreement has to be inscribed on clay bricks, burnt, and then plastered round with fresh clay, on which the text of the agreement is inscribed a second time. That is costly, burdensome and useless; for if a man has any desire to act unjustly and to cheat the soul of his brother he will not be restrained by signs twice inscribed on clay.'

'You say truly,' Ab-Ram answered. 'I lived many years outside the city of Ur on the Lower Euphrates, and I have myself seen such agreements being inscribed on tablets, in the workshop of Adon Taribal, a seller of tablets. Yet I never heard that in the city of Ur there was any less dishonourable behaviour than in other cities where this custom is unknown. The wise ruler should rather seek to implant honesty in the hearts of his subjects. Where the mind is honest, the exchanged sandal suffices.'

The king agreed and, as he drank wine, confided to his guest the anxiety that was felt among the northern tribes by Hammurabi's military preparations. 'They say,' he said, 'that the Babylonian has summoned the Elamites with their king, and the Hittites, and all the other peoples whom he has laid under tribute. Against whom is he intending to march? He has renewed his alliance with the king of Assyria, so the points of his spears are not turned against Nineveh.'

'Of a suréty it is against Egypt,' Ab-Ram surmised.

'I think not, son of Terah. In that case *Melek melakim* would have concentrated his forces to the south.'

'Indeed, you speak truly,' Ab-Ram amiably agreed. He was not greatly concerned about the Babylonian's intentions. Struggles between kings did not affect the free, wandering pastoral tribes. Even if *Melek melakim* advanced as far as this spot, Ab-Ram, would always be able to slip out of his way betimes.

• Son of the Flesh

THOUGH THE TWENTIETH DAY OF THE MONTH TISHRI WAS REGARDED AS one of good fortune, for the moon was waning, Hagar's labour was prolonged and difficult. She grew weak, though she was given wine with the fat of sheep's kidneys to drink. The midwife Jokshah, noted for her skill, vainly repeated the adjuration:

'Woman, whose womb is sealed, whose breasts vainly gather nourishment, be unbound and liberated. As rain opens the womb of the earth, so may the goddess Damkina open thy womb and bring forth a son to our chief. I unloose thee, lady, as a fettered ass. . . . May I unloose her by thy command, Nin-lil, may I unloose her, Zifbanit. . . .'

Early in the morning, when the travail first began, a lamb was killed and its blood was smeared over the couch, the skins of the couch, and the canvas of the tent. This safeguarded the labouring woman against demons, who are always avid for blood. They would not enter into her womb, for they had blood enough all around. Besides attracting the demons, it also drew off the flies buzzing in an avid swarm about Hagar; but in this respect it was not very efficacious.

Jokshah recited slowly, beckoning to Resa and Michol to tell them what they had to do:

'Wrap her head in white wool, bind her left side with black wool. Let depart the evil *utukku*, the evil *galu*, the evil *ilu*, the evil *rabisu*. . . .'

She raised her voice in command, pointing with her finger i^a to space:

'Of these there are seven, of these there are seven; seven gods of the earth, seven gods of heaven. Seven in the hill, seven in the vale; everywhere of these there are seven. . . . Seven bad *labartu*, seven horrible *labasi*, seven *lilu*, seven *liliti*, seven *namtaru*. . . .'

The spells were without effect, and the tired, sweating woman whispered to Resa:

'Run to Ab-Ram son of Terah; let him give his tablets, all he possesses. The demons are very obstinate. We will set the tablets all round the couch. . . .'

Resa hastened to Ab-Ram, who was waiting impatiently in his tent.

'I have no tablets,' he replied, when she told him what she had come for.

'If you do not possess many tablets, then give at least one.'

'I have not even one.'

'Not one tablet?' Eliezer's wife exclaimed. She looked at Noa and Sarai, who hung their heads. They understood her consternation.

'Fear not, Resa!' Ab-Ram said. 'Tell Jokshah, too, that she need have no fear. Hagar will bring forth the child successfully. The Lord on High has promised me a numerous progeny.'

She went away unconvinced. The people of the camp had long since ceased to believe in Ab-Ram's extraordinary, invisible and incomprehensible god.

The night was far spent when the child came into the world. It was big, and strong. Its head was a little deformed by the long travail, but that would pass without trace. When the midwife rubbed him hard with salt in order to give him strength he raised his voice in a great cry. All the three women praised him for his well-arched chest, his broad little shoulders, and prophesied that he would be tall and handsome. Hagar was hardly breathing. With faded eyes she watched every movement the women made, her lips were parted like the mouth of a fish out of water. Jokshah advised her to sleep, assuring her that she, Jokshah, would be able to keep the demons at a distance; but with an almost imperceptible movement of the head Hagar rejected the advice, and kept her eyes fixed on the child. After feeding her on milk and honey, the women lit a couple of rushlights and set about the ceremony of purification. They were helped by old Igal, who, as he was blind, could be in the proximity of a woman with child; and the spells were no menace to him, for he knew the corresponding adjurations. Throwing scented herbs on to glowing coals, he incensed the tent, the earthen floor, the couch, the vessels, and the earth all round the tent. In a solemn tone he specified all the articles in the vicinity. If he were to overlook even the least important article it might become a refuge for a demon. Naming it by name closed the entry to all evil powers. Then Hagar was transferred to a new, clean couch, and the one on which she had borne the child was burnt. Her clothing and the

wrap round her head were also burnt. As Igal raked them over in the fire he pronounced:

'As from burnt wool man does not weave a cloak, as a charred leaf will not grow into a palm, nor a scorched grain give birth to wheat, so do thou vanish and be gone. Depart! Depart! May the sea swallow up the spells, may they be dispersed by the hills. May the gods of fire, *Girru*, and *Gibilu*, consume all traces of thee. . . .'

The tent walls which had been smeared with lamb's blood were washed with water. The sick woman breathed more easily, for the air grew fresher. The water streaming off the canvas on to the ground was incensed and adjured again. Without that, anyone treading on it would have become unclean.

When dawn came all the rites were completed, and Resa informed Ab-Ram that he could come and see his son. Sarai, agitated and moved, went with her husband. But when she appeared at the entrance, Hagar – the dying, helpless Hagar – screamed frightfully and struggled violently.

'*Lamastu!*' she cried. '*Lamastu!*'

Sarai's face went black at the insult. *Lamastu* was the name of a horrible witch who whispers to a woman in confinement: 'let me set my breast in thy son's mouth', and then flees with the child and turns it into a bat. Sarai stood uncertainly. The Egyptian woman's eyes flamed savagely. A rattle sounded in her throat.

'Return to the tent, woman,' Ab-Ram commanded his wife. These women's squabbles, so incomprehensible to a man, were unpleasant; all he wanted was to see his son as quickly as possible. Sarai returned to her tent, and burst into tears of sorrow and anger.

'She called me *Lamastu*,' she complained to her old foster-mother. 'What ought I to do?'

'If you could draw off her milk into a vessel,' Noa instructed her, 'and then pour it on the ground outside the tent, she would yield the child herself.'

Resa put the naked, little newly born, crying infant into Ab-Ram's arms. Jokshah proudly pointed out that he was healthy and would be a fine man. The father's arms trembled. Here at last was the long awaited son, brought forth belatedly, for Ab-Ram had more grey than black hairs in his beard. In this little child, as fragile as a chick, rested the great promise of God. Through him the line of Ab-Ram would spread into an

exuberant tree. Thanks to him Ab-Ram had returned to his Lord, convinced that he had not been forgotten or rejected.

All the tribe of the sons of Eber was now gathered outside the tent. The older men stood in a semicircle in front, the younger men pressed on them from behind. The moment was a solemn one for them all. The chief had been granted a son who at some future time would govern the tribe. Ab-Ram emerged from the tent, holding the infant with both hands high in the air. He showed him to the assembled tribesmen, then pressed the little head with its tufts of black down tenderly to his chest, in sign that he recognised the child as his.

'His name is Ishmael,' he proclaimed. 'The name given to him by the Lord.'

'Blessings be on thy son's head, Ab-Ram! May health accompany him all his days! May he live to a happy old age! May he be thy support in thine old age!'

With a silent bow of the head Ab-Ram thanked them. From the camp-fire flaming in the middle of the encampment, at which calves and sheep were being roasted in honour of the child's birth, came the smell of cooking meat, tickling the noses of all the assembled tribe.

Ab-Ram withdrew into the tent. Michol took the infant from him and swaddled it diligently. Only now did Ab-Ram look at Hagar. In his fatherly exultation he had forgotten her, and now he felt remorse. The mother of his son, the concubine for whom he had only recently burned with desire, had a face like death; the skin was drawn tightly around the temples, the nose was wizened and peaked. The life fleeing from her was concentrated in her eyes, which were watchful even though she was half unconscious. The deathly sweat that had streamed from her during the past twenty-four hours had run the paint elongating her eyes, Egyptian fashion, to the temples, and the feverishly glittering pupils seemed to dissolve into brown shapelessness. The whites were bloodshot with her recent strain. With eyes looking like painful wounds, she shifted her gaze from her lord to the child which Michol was rocking. Drawn by her gaze, Ab-Ram bent over the couch; but she whispered almost inaudibly:

'Kill me, Ab-Ram, before you take him. . . .'

His heart was torn with compassion. 'Rest in peace,' he gently answered. 'I shall not take him without your consent.'

She tried to smile in answer, but she only writhed her lips painfully. When Ab-Ram went out Resa overtook him.

'Ab-Ram son of Terah,' she said. 'Tell your wife, Sarai, that she can take away the child at once. Hagar has lost much blood and she will not live longer than two or three days.'

'Do all you can, Resa, to keep the life within her,' he replied, deeply moved.

'We will strive with a great striving, but you must make sacrifices to the goddess Damkina. . . .'

'I will not make sacrifices, but I will ask the Lord on High.'

She turned back without a word, not daring to say what she thought.

Ab-Ram's assurance had not satisfied Hagar. She was feverish, grew slowly weaker, and continually trembled for the child. Half conscious, she muttered Egyptian and Chaldean spells, and shielded the infant with her hands against the least rustle. Filled with compassion, Ab-Ram asked Sarai to reassure Hagar, and she agreed, though reluctantly. Standing by the couch over which death had spread its wings, she said:

'Bondwoman Hagar, know that I shall not take away Ishmael, son of Ab-Ram, as long as you live.'

Hagar gazed at her intently, as though not understanding. Slowly, expressively, Sarai repeated the words. Then the Egyptian woman understood. Her face relaxed, she lost her expression of fearful watchfulness. But when Sarai wanted to touch the child she began to whimper, and pushed her away with one hand.

Sarai shrugged her shoulders:

'But I have said that I will not take him from you.'

She stood silent, gazing regretfully at the little sleeping being. The dream of her life, the dream which now would never be realised. To bear a child, to feel it beside her, feeble, warm, and helpless, to feed it with her own breast. . . . The fruit of her belly, the extension of her life. . . . It would have been no hard thing to die, if she could have left it behind in the world.

Despite her attendants' opinion, Hagar did not die. She was ill for a long time, but she lived. At the next new moon she got up to sit outside the tent; she was yellow, emaciated, strengthless. But the child was fine and fat beyond belief. Jokshah declared that the Egyptian woman's womb had dropped and she would not bear any more children. Hagar loved her only son all the more ardently. Sarai could not forgive herself for believing that

her handmaid 'would die, for now she had left her with the child for all her lifetime.

'It is magic,' Resa whispered, feeling that she was to blame. 'It is magic, O Sarai. Any woman should have died after losing so much blood.'

'Magic? . . . Is Hagar then a witch?' Sarai eagerly snatched at this idea, which explained both Ab-Ram's temporary infatuation and her own hatred for her rival. 'A witch! A sorceress! That explains everything. It explains why this strange woman (witches usually work among strangers, where their devilish origin is not known) did not die despite her loss of blood. A human being cannot live without blood, but a witch has the blood of a bat or an owl at her command.'

Fortunately, there was a method of rendering a witch impotent. Her power lasted only as long as it was not discovered. One need only point one's hand, after saying: 'thou art a witch', for her power to go from her. The witch would be turned into a horrible monster, or a scorpion, a snake or a jackal, and would flee to the world.

'I will go and point at her,' Sarai decided; for she was not timorous.

'Beware, my dove, beware! She will kill you.'

Sarai shook her head arrogantly and went out. Hagar was sitting outside her tent, feeding the child. Sarai went right up to her.

'Thou art a witch! Thou art a sorceress!' she cried, stretching out her hand. Despite her courage her knees trembled under her in expectation of what would follow.

But Hagar did not stir in the least.

'I am not a sorceress,' she answered, gazing coldly at Ab-Ram's wife. 'I have often regretted that I am not.'

Sarai could not conceal her amazement.

'You wanted to be a sorceress? Why?'

'In order to poison you with my spittle.'

'You snake!'

'You bitch!'

Panting with hate, they would have rushed at each other but for the child at Hagar's breast, the child of the man to whom they both belonged. The infant stopped sucking and turned its tender face, all unknowing of the world, to Sarai. Hagar hastily covered it with a kerchief to shield her son against her enemy's gaze.

Sarai's anger melted into sudden grief. Subdued, crushed, she walked away swiftly, in order to hide her tears. When she vanished into the tent

Hagar removed the kerchief, and gazed lovingly at the child. The derisive, passionate look slipped from her face, and it grew gentle, tender. Swaying all her body from left to right, from right to left, she hummed an old Egyptian cradle song which tells about the goddess Hathor, who has the shape of a cow:

‘Four teats has the goddess, my little son,
From two of them hast thou drawn food, little son.
On two of them thou retest thy cheek, little son.
From the four teats the source of life has flowed
into thee, my little son.’

‘Thou Art Goel’

ISHMAEL SON OF AB-RAM HAD REACHED HIS SECOND BIRTHDAY, AND ALL the tribe was feasting in celebration of the event. The future ruler of the tribe could run well on his sturdy little legs, and was conscious of his importance. Dark-eyed, with a skin as brown and smooth as a date, he resembled both his father and his mother in his beauty. But he was developing a violent temper. At the least opposition to his wishes he bawled as though bewitched, rolled on the ground, struggled, and bit whatever his hand seized upon. Hagar helped to encourage his tendency of his by her blind, imprudent love for him. She never struck him herself, and would not let anyone else lay a finger on him. She yielded to all his caprices, and adoringly exalted those characteristics which indicated his future virtues. Truly the child was brave, he was afraid of nothing and no one. He had a keen, inquisitive look. His mother’s tenderness bored him, and he gladly got away from her by going off to the shepherds, who had much fun with him, seating him on an ass or a cow. He could not stand Sarai, probably because of his mother’s influence, and fled from her with all the strength of his legs, or hid behind a tent and shouted at her: ‘Hag!’ The shepherds’ wives shook their heads dubiously over such shocking behaviour, and declared that the tribe had never known such an extraordinary child.

‘May he soon reach the age of seven and come under our master’s care,’ Eliezer sighed. But for the time being Ab-Ram did not interfere in the child’s upbringing. He had no understanding of children – which was natural, for he had had none before. He took for granted that the boy would remain amenable to his handling, and postponed the task of working the clay until he could begin to train him for his life work, under sensible discipline, as he himself had been trained. For the time being he was satisfied with the joy of having a son. He found great pleasure in

listening to the herdmen when they praised the boy's health, beauty, and energy. He did not take much notice of Noa's and Sarai's bitter complaints; he had long since come to the conclusion that there can be no peace between wrangling women.

The tribesmen were still seated at the banquet, reclining comfortably on seats of skins, when a man in extraordinary attire came towards them between the tents. He was neither shepherd, nor merchant; neither priest nor strolling player. The Hebrews had met with all these types, but they had never seen such a freakish character before. He was wearing shamelessly tight-fitting garments of cloth in vari-coloured stripes. On his head, instead of a turban or kerchief he had a small round cap of the same material. This attire, which evidently had cost a great deal when new, was ragged, the man's face was stubbly and dirty. He halted in the middle of the square formed by the tents, like a man mortally weary and without strength to take another step. But they all stared at him distrustfully, thinking he must be mad.

Old Noa, setting her hands to her eyes, was the first to recognise him. She exclaimed:

'Great gods! Is that not Hibal, herdman to the son of Haran?'

'Greetings, Noa; it is indeed I, Hibal. Summon Ab-Ram son of Terah; I have an important message for him. . . . Lo's wife attired me thus. I and three others carry her in a litter. . . .'

'Why, has she grown so heavy that it takes four of you to carry her?'

'Two bear the litter, one runs in front to clear the way, and one comes behind. . . . Summon Ab-Ram son of Terah quickly. . . .'

'What is a litter?' Ketura asked, her eyes starting out of her head.

'Stupid!' Noa snorted at the girl. 'Don't ask questions but give him some milk and meat. You can see he is road-weary.'

Hibal attacked the food greedily, but he would not sit down. Ab-Ram arrived, excited by the news that a messenger had come from his nephew Lot. He, too, could not restrain a smile at the sight of this former herdman's extraordinary garb. But he turned serious when Hibal, flinging himself at Ab-Ram's feet, cried out: 'Woe! Woe! Ab-Ram, son of Terah! Lot son of Haran has been put in fetters and driven off like a slave.'

Ab-Ram's face turned pale with anger.

'Who has taken my nephew prisoner?' he exclaimed.

'The king of Babylon, the king of Elam, the king of the Hittites and

the king of Larsa. . . . They came with a great army, pillaged the cities, drove the men off into slavery, and my master with them. . . .'

'Hibal!' Ab-Ram said, deeply disturbed by the news. 'My eyes desired never to see you again'. You were the cause of Lot son of Haran departing from me. I adjure you now in the name of the Lord Most High, speak only the truth. What has happened to my nephew?'

Hibal hung his head.

'I am to blame, Ab-Ram son of Terah. Your words are just. But this one thing I say: I would give half my days if we could undo our parting from you. . . .'

'A belated regret! Last year's rain! Go on!'

Seeing that Hibal was very tired, he added in a more gracious tone: 'Sit down!'

But Hibal would not sit while the master stood, so Ab-Ram also sat down; all the tribe pressed round them in a close circle.

'Long ago,' the messenger began, 'the priests of Sodom prophesied that evil days were coming. The omens were very unfavourable, but the people were not greatly troubled. The harvests were good. No one knew that foreign kings were approaching with armies. But it appears they set out a year ago from the north, scattering all the forces opposing their passage and capturing all the cities that lie beyond the Jordan. And then they fell on us like vultures on sheep. We in the valley heard of their coming only when they had crossed the mountains, though the mountains are very difficult to cross and I know not how they succeeded. The priests said nothing, though it is said they know all that goes on in the world. It is true they had given warning a year before, but the king had no faith in them. No one in Sodom was expecting any evil, until the people from Gomorrah and Seboim came running, crying: "Woe! Woe!" They said there were more enemy bowmen than there are trees in the valley. Bera son of Henos, king of Sodom, gathered together two hundred warriors with swords and spears. On their backs they carried bows ornamented and painted, but in their quivers they had so few arrows that it was laughable. The kings of Gomorrah, Admah, Seboim and Bela which is Zoar also came running to Sodom. All four of them had not more than another two hundred men. They went out together from the southern gate of the city. We were told later that they came into conflict with the Babylonian and Elamite forces to the east of Gomorrah, and there were so many of the enemy that when they all fired their bows at once the

arrows seemed like a horde of flying locusts. And they had excellent broad swords and round, woven shields. At the sight of this armed host the Sodomites fled, and king Bera first of all. He rode an ass, for he is very stout and cannot run; the king of Gomorrah rode right behind him and they fled blindly through the forest, in the direction of the slime pits.

‘What pits?’ Ab-Ram, who was listening with close attention, interrupted.

‘They are holes reaching to the bottom of the earth, in which black pitch boils and stinks. The people always avoid going near them, but now fear blinded the kings’ eyes. They rode straight towards the pits, the king of Sodom in front. His ass stopped suddenly on the edge of a pit and the king flew over the animal’s head into the slime. . . . The king of Gomorrah and others flew after him. They struggled and sank and clutched at one another, but they had no firm foothold. The Babylonians ran up to capture them and then tie them in tens, and they drew the king of Sodom and the others who were still alive out of the pit with ropes, but the king of Gomorrah was drowned.

‘While this was happening I was lying beside my master on the terrace of the house. Both of us were in great alarm, and I said to him: “Let us flee!” Answering, the son of Haran said: “Whither shall we flee? They would find me and drive me into slavery; but if they come here I shall say that I am a free man. A free man does not flee.” And we lay on the roof watching what would happen, and the tumult drew near and we realised that the Sodomite force was defeated and the victors were coming, for a terrible weeping and lamentation were to be heard everywhere in the city. The son of Haran said again: “Hibal, you will render a service to my soul if you do what I command you.” I replied: “Say what you desire, my lord.” He said: “Hide, and watch what they do with me. If evil things come upon me endeavour to escape and go to my uncle, Ab-Ram son of Terah, to tell him what you have seen. That is all I ask of you.” I answered, “My lord, I will do as you command.” And at once I made my way down from the roof. I knew that just behind the house is a secret passage through the city wall, of which few are aware. There I hid in the bushes and watched what would happen further. Opposite my lord’s house is a square, and on the square a great marble palace with very broad marble steps. The Babylonians entered the city through the gate in great order and at once began to drive the inhabitants off to work. From

the royal palace they brought four thrones, of which one was larger, and set them down on the steps. Then the foreign kings arrived in gilded litters, and trumpets of horn were sounded until the noise roared in the ears. The kings took their seats, with the Babylonian Hammurabi, the same who came to Ur, on the larger throne in the centre. El-Gad, the high priest of the temple of Sodom, sat on the steps by the king of Elam, as a friend and servant, not as a slave. Then Bera son of Henos was driven in. He was still covered with slime, and his dress was disordered; dry streaks of the pitch were left on his face. The high priest said to him: "Where are those lions which were born of sheep? Surely it was a she-ass that bore thee as a sheep or a dog?" The king of Elam, Cheder-laomer, looked at the Babylonian, but Hammurabi looked straight before him as though he saw nothing. So the king of Elam said to Bera son of Henos: "Kneel." King Bera knelt, though he was very stout. Then Cheder-laomer set his feet on Bera's neck and pressed him hard to the ground and held him there. When, wearied, he withdrew his feet, the king of Sodom did not move. So the king of Elam kicked him with his foot as if he were a carcass and Bera rolled down the steps, leaving traces of pitch. The slaves picked him up and carried him away, and others wiped the steps, and I know not what happened further to the king of Sodom, for I fled, seeing that the soldiers were piling their shields and entering the houses to pillage them.

'Where were Lot's wife and children while all this was happening?' Ab-Ram asked.

'In the temple. There they were in safety, for the soldiers were not allowed to enter the temple.'

'Why did the son of Haran not take refuge there with her?'

'The son of Haran would not enter the temple, where his wife spent more time than at home. . . .' Hibal hesitated for a moment, then burst out: 'Ab-Ram son of Terah! If you knew how Edith, Lot's wife, behaves, you would forbid her entrance for ever into your camp.'

Ab-Ram knitted his brows. It was not for a servant to judge his master's wife. Hibal understood the mute reproach, and hurriedly went on:

'I fled from the city, but I did not depart from the valley. My lord, your servant climbed a high and thick palm tree that grew beside the way. There I sat all day. I saw the soldiers carrying pillaged goods out of the city and piling them in great heaps. Babylonian centurions guarded this property, and scribes noted every article down on tablets. I heard cries of

pain, coming from the men, women and children taken into captivity in the city. Then I saw the soldiers of the four kings marching back towards the mountains. They marched from the south until evening came on, and they were like a host, as though all the warriors of the world were assembled there. The kings were borne in litters, then came more warriors, then asses laden with plunder, and herds of cattle driven out from all the valley. I recognised our cattle by a bald-faced bull with crumpled horn. The prisoners were driven along right at the end. There were very many. The rich ladies of Sodom had been stripped of their robes, for they were all dressed like slaves. They dragged along, wailing. Some of them were carrying children, but these must have been servants, for I had never seen the ladies of Sodom taking any care for their children. The women were unfettered but the men had their hands tied behind them, and were chained together in tens. With every ten there was an overseer carrying a whip and a spear. With the whip they whipped up those who lagged behind. I watched closely from the palm branches, and saw my lord. He was walking with others, and he looked back at the city. And I saw an overseer strike him across the face with a whip. . . .

'Silence!' Ab-Ram said thickly. He flung the hem of his cloak over his head, and sat thus for a long time, for he could not endure the thought of his kinsman being driven like cattle and struck with a whip.

'What else?' he asked at last, in a hoarse voice.

'That is all your servant saw. When the soldiers had passed and night fell I came down from the tree. The soldiers had gone to the east, I went to the west. I ran to you neither sleeping nor eating, that you might hear this news early. . . .'

'What is all this to me?' Ab-Ram was thinking. 'When Lot told Hibal to come to me did he expect his uncle to go to his aid? What aid could I give? I cannot strike at the Babylonian's warriors. Lot chose freely to depart from me, renouncing my protection. . . .'

'I had no love for you in the past, Hibal,' he said, turning to the messenger. 'You caused confusion among the herds and provoked quarrels. I forgive you these faults, because you have told me of the misfortune that has come upon the son of Haran. Eliezer will give you clothing and a cloak. You may remain with me, if you wish.'

Hibal made a low obeisance; he was obviously disappointed. And, indeed, all the assembly seemed to have been expecting other words from Ab-Ram. They dispersed slowly, discussing the extraordinary news.

Profiting by the general preoccupation, the everlastingly hungry camp-dogs devoured the remnants of the birthday feast.

Gloomy, with clouded face, Ab-Ram went to his tent. At the entrance Sarai was awaiting him; her eyes were glittering. 'You will go after them?' she asked impetuously, forgetting the respect due to her husband.

'After whom, woman?' he reluctantly asked.

'After those who have fettered Lot and driven him off. You must hurry if you would overtake them.'

'What can I do against their forces? You heard what Hibal told us?'

'Thou art his Goel,' she declared solemnly, with conviction.

'I was; but now I am not, for he himself abandoned the tribe.'

Not disposed to argue with a woman, he went off into the heart of the encampment. Ishmael ran up to his father, shouting with joy, Hagar followed quickly after him and knelt down beside her son. She was once more as beautiful as of old.

'Rameh!' she whispered tenderly, 'I was afraid a demon would confuse your thoughts, and that you would want to go and rescue the son of Haran. You would perish, and then what would I do with the child?'

'I have told you before, Hagar,' he curtly replied, 'not to call me Rameh. My name is Ab-Ram. Take the child away.'

He walked on, leaving her dumbfounded. He went swiftly, torn with conflicting thoughts. Though a man may not reckon with the words of a woman, the opinions the two women had just expressed echoed in his ears. 'You will go after them. Thou art his Goel!' so, his wife had said. 'I was afraid you would go,' the bondwoman, the mother of his son, had confessed. It was clear that all the camp was expecting him to rescue Lot.

'I cannot go,' he told himself. 'A man of mature thought does not commit an imprudent madness. I will not go with my herdmen against the armed and trained troops of the Babylonian and his vassals. I fled before Hammurabi, covering my tracks like a partridge before a hawk; and am I now to go myself voluntarily into his jaws?'

'“Thou art his Goel.” It is your duty. The fact that he left you does not free you from your obligation. Your kinsman is being driven in chains, beaten with whips, and would you sit with folded arms, Ab-Ram?'

'I cannot destroy the whole tribe for the sake of Lot,' he answered himself. He had no one with whom to take counsel. What would his father have said? All his life Terah had lived imprudently and impetuously.

He had agreed to leave Ur in order to escape being placed in subjection. If he were living he would surely exclaim: 'I do not desire to see my blood dishonoured.' But Nahor, Ab-Ram's prudent elder brother? Before his eyes arose the emaciated man, once so stout, whom he had left behind in Harran. If he could be asked, undoubtedly he would reply in his own manner: 'Blood calls to blood, blood wipes out blood. The clouds and the wind and the rain will not go after them, measure not a man according to his promises.'

'I have no one to take counsel with,' Ab-Ram repeated, inwardly lamenting. But he came to an abrupt halt, for he felt that his own soul was crying out: 'You have no one to take counsel with? You fool! Has the Lord ever refused you an answer? Who will aid you when you go to rescue the captive? The same who aided you when you fled before the Babylonian! Do your part, leaving the rest to the Lord, and be not afraid. . . .'

He returned to the camp with a very different step, resolute, swift, energetic. The hesitations were ended, the decision was taken. There remained only prudently to consider the expedition.

'How many men can we arm?' he curtly asked Eliezer.

'Not more than one hundred and twenty,' the servant answered hurriedly, as though he were expecting the question. 'The old men like Igal are unsuitable. A few men must remain in the camp. On the other hand we have half three score of immature youths who are all but weeping in their entreaties to be taken. Capable lads. Not very good at using the bow, but they can wield the sling with left hand and right. . . .'

'Who has told them that we are going?'

'My lord, just not with your servant. In every tent arrows are being feathered and rusty spears cleaned. . . . Why, you are Lot's Goel. . . .'

He went with Eliezer to the tent that served as the armoury of rarely used weapons, in order to examine the equipment. They had few arrows. The unused swords bought in Ur before the flight were kept in chests; they were sharp and in good condition, but there were very few of them. They had many bows of various kinds, some of them ancient, and so large and heavy that in order to draw the string the archer had to set his foot on one end of the bow. Among them, too, were bows very rarely met with, consisting of two wild goats' horns united at their bases with binding of brass wire. These were light and flexible, but easily broken. After considering the position, Ab-Ram decided to send Eliezer to

Abimelech at Gerar. 'Let him take munificent payment, but let him lend us weapons. Tell him: "You are an Amorite. The King of Babylon and his vassals have killed an Amorite."' "

Without delaying Eliezer mounted an ass and set off. As once before, at Ur, Ab-Ram himself went through the camp, seeing to everything. Sur and Hibal, radiant with joy, accompanied him, running to and fro with orders. As he stood by the pile of collected weapons Hagar came to him with Ishmael on her back. She fell on her knees before him:

'What are you doing, my lord? Whither are you going?'

'I shall go wherever I wish, and shall do as I desire,' he replied emphatically. 'Return to your tent, Hagar. That is the place for you and the child.'

'You must kill your servant, my lord, before I let you go. Do you intend to march against the Babylonian?'

'Return at once to your tent!' he firmly repeated. 'It is not fitting for a man to argue with a woman. . . .'

'It is fitting for a man to care for his own seed,' she cried. 'You will go and you will perish, and what will become of the child? What will become of me? They will drive me out. You cannot go. Ab-Ram! You cannot abandon your son!'

'The Lord will take care of my son, if I perish.'

She hissed in anger and sorrow:

'The Lord!' she mimicked him. 'The Lord! Your god whom no one has ever seen.'

'But you saw Him by the fountain in the wilderness.'

'I did not see anyone at all!' she snarled. 'I lied so that you should not laugh at me for returning. I did not see anyone. I invented it.'

She was silent, covering her mouth with her hand, terrified by her own confession. Ab-Ram stared at her, not understanding. Ishmael kicked his feet against his mother's sides and chewed a date.

'Bondwoman!' Ab-Ram asked in a choking voice: 'You lied that the Angel of the Lord had stood before you and spoken to you?'

She burst into tears. 'I was ashamed,' she explained. 'Oh, call me not bondwoman! I am Hagar, the mother of your son.'

He did not reply. His eyes fixed on the ground, his brows knitted, he was pondering on her words. She trembled with fear. But instead of flaring up with anger he unexpectedly laughed. His laugh was contemptuous, but sincere.

'You lied, bondwoman,' he said, 'but the Lord used your lying in order to recall me to Him. May His Name be blessed. Now go.'

He did not give her one glance as she departed, depressed. As he counted the bundles of arrows he asked Hibal which way the invaders had taken as they retired. But the herdman could not add anything to what he had said, that they had entered the valley from the west, coming from the city of Kadesh, but had left by an eastern pass. From this it could be deduced that they intended to journey northward through the trans-Jordan district. Hibal also repeated what he had heard from the temple servants, that the four monarchs had turned into the valley of Siddim only in order to satisfy the desire of the king of Elam, who had been refused tribute some years before. The real object of the expedition had already been achieved, and the armies were returning to their homes.

Ab-Ram did not sleep all night, but lay considering this meagre information and trying to draw conclusions from it. On deeper thought his first intention, of overtaking the invaders, seemed unsatisfactory. A sally from the mountains was condemned to failure in advance. He decided to move along the western shore of the Salt Lake, through the land of the Canaanites, which he knew, because he had passed through those districts when journeying from Haran to Egypt. It was a fertile land, with water in abundance, and easy roads. If they rode swiftly, not sparing asses or camels, they could easily outstrip the enemy forces and slip into the great oak groves in the vicinity of Damascus, waiting there for a favourable opportunity.

At dawn next morning he began to choose his men. Part of the force was to ride on camels, three to each camel. The animals were well fed, and rested, and could carry the additional weight. Each ass would carry two men. Those for whom there were not sufficient animals would march on foot, and would exchange places with the riders every half day. In this way the advance would proceed efficiently, and no one would be left on the road. They were to take as little with them as possible. Skins of water, dried cakes, and dates. Arms were the most important thing. Ab-Ram decided that if Eliezer returned empty-handed he would purchase the additional quantity required, stopping to do so in one of the cities on the road.

They set out on the third day after Hibal's arrival. Not far from the city of Hebron, in a beautiful valley shaded with an oak grove growing on the slopes, they met Eliezer, waiting for his master, and over a hundred

armed men with him. They were commanded by Eshcol and Aher, whom Ab-Ram had met by the well of Nahor; the fine oak grove belonged to their brother Mamre. Eliezer gesticulated with delight, as was his wont, when he told what had happened. Abimelech, he said, had not forbidden and had not persuaded, but had allowed men to be called together. 'I talked to them in these words: "Lend us arms or sell them to us, but best of all, go with us, for arms are of less worth than strong right hands." To which Eshcol, a very valiant man, said: "I shall go with my men." Others cried: "Has a mist veiled thy mind, Eshcol? You will perish. You are dealing with the Babylonian!" To which he said: "I can enrich myself from the Babylonian. Either I will perish or I will return wealthy and will rule over you." "It will not be as you expect, but you will lose your life and the jackals will draw your bones about the wilderness." Then I said: "Why do you take the heart from a man of valour? The God of Ab-Ram, who led him out of Ur of the Chaldees, guarding him in all his difficulties, He will protect him." Eshcol's brother added: "I have heard that great is the god of Ab-Ram. I will go with my brother." The king, who hearkened diligently, remarked: "Of a truth, great is the god of Ab-Ram, since so many men are ready to follow at your call. I would myself praise him that he might not be so jealous of other gods. And I will lend you arrows; as many as you can carry on three asses." And so we have come. We have one hundred and six men altogether, and I have laden on to three asses enough arrows as would suffice for a large army.' 'And I have two hundred and twelve men,' Ab-Ram, replied in great joy. 'Blessed be those who have come with you. Let us go.'

The snowy summit of Mount Hermion, known as the 'Father of Springs', dominated all the vicinity. Numerous streams barred the way. Their water was icy cold, and clear, unlike the turbid waters of the lower course of the Jordan or the Euphrates. Along the streams grew a dense forest of oak, sycamore, hazel and mulberry trees. The tendrils of wild vine and hops trailed over the branches, and hung down to the earth like green curtains. Ab-Ram and his men waded laboriously through a stream which later ran into the headwaters of the Jordan; they made their way through the forests; to the south of the city of Lais they came upon a well-trodden track running north and south, but turning eastward not far from the spot where they halted. At first they thought it must be the track of buffaloes going down to drink, for they were numerous in these

forests; but the road was too wide for that. Ab-Ram's force moved along it cautiously, listening and looking about them. Very soon an abandoned broken lance attracted Hibal's attention. A little farther on lay a quiver with a hole in it. They went on, and came across the traces of numerous camp fires, where evidently a halt had been called for the night. Not buffaloes but soldiers had taken this path.

The ashes and partially consumed brands of the camp fires had been lying a long time, the quiver was damp and rotted with many dews, the grass was already growing over the track. Ab-Ram deduced that the four kings had marched this way on their journey southward, some months before. Would they return by this same road? Ab-Ram withdrew into the forest, posting guards close to the road, and sent out spies in order to gather information.

Leaving their arms in the forest, dressed as they were as simple shepherds these emissaries could not arouse anyone's suspicions. It would never occur to anybody that such warriors intended to measure their strength with Hammurabi. Before they could make inquiries and return the reality itself provided its testimony. Through the dense undergrowth of the forest ran a shiver of alarm. Numerous vultures hovered in the air. Startled smaller forest animals fled straight under the feet of the lurking men. Sur crawled out of the bushes on to the road, and saw in the distance a cloud of dust pierced with the glitter of spears. The army of the king of Babylon and his allies was returning from its victorious expedition.

Ab-Ram with several others lay hidden in the thicket right beside the road. The others, with the camels, asses, and weapons, remained concealed in the forest, within sound of the chief's whistle. The cloud appeared to remain in one spot; the earth drummed with the innumerable bare feet treading it, but for a long time no one approached.

At last bowmen, shieldsmen, and slingers appeared within sight. They marched in fours, raising their feet rhythmically. They carried shields, round in the Assyrian style, and wore broad ornamental leather belts to protect their bellies and ribs in battle. At their sides swung quivers filled with arrows; over their shoulders were thin, flexible bows, bags of food, and bags of water. Each man carried a spear, and a short, two-edged sword hung at his belt.

From time to time there was a break in the ranks of fours. In the middle of the road a centurion marched alone, recognisable from a distance by his glittering necklace. The bowmen all passed, and were followed by

Sudanese, as black as soot, whom the Babylonian had bought from the king of Egypt. Completely naked, glistening with sweat, they carried shields of Egyptian design, huge and with square corners, hanging over their backs. Their girdles opened out below into skirts. The gigantic fellows flashed their teeth rapaciously, and stepped along as quiet and lithe as leopards.

Lying on the ground, Ab-Ram watched with dilated eyes. He was possessed with anxiety. What was he planning to do? Past him marched an army efficient, well armed, victorious. Against this might he had three hundred shepherds expert in the use of slings and throwing clubs at cattle, but not in military battles. His anxiety turned to fear, his fear almost to panic. He would bring destruction on the tribe! Withdraw betimes, without attacking!

The temptation lasted only a moment. He rejected it, grew strong in himself, and called on the Name of the Lord for aid. On the terrible Name, unknown to mortals. And now again calm, he closely studied the marching men. One group passed, another came up; rank after rank, detachment after detachment; until the regular movements of their legs began to make the watchers' heads swim. The sun stood high and was roasting. The sounds of centurions' whistles passed along the ranks. A halt was called.

Now Ab-Ram could quietly retire from his post and withdraw into the forest. The advance would not be renewed for a couple of hours, when the eye of the day had crossed the meridian. As he crawled cautiously out of the bushes he saw the wearied soldiers laying aside their weapons and shields, and flinging themselves down in the wayside shade. Some of them wished to save themselves the bother of even these few steps: leaning two shields one against the other, they shaded their heads under the roof thus made and lay on the road where they had stood.

The shadows lengthened, the heat of the day passed, the centurions' pipes sounded again. The soldiers rose to their feet, and began to move on. Lurking in his previous post of vantage, Ab-Ram watched from beneath the hanging vines. Now he saw the four kings ride along, surrounded by picked forces in gilded helmets. The kings were not in litters, but in carts, to which the snorting, steaming beasts which Ur had regarded as demons were harnessed.

'They did not have them in the valley,' Hibal whispered into Ab-Ram's ear. 'They must have been awaiting beyond the lake, for they could not cross the mountains.'

Incessantly, uninterruptedly the soldiers came on, and on. Among them were men carrying huge two-edged axes, and others with enormous bows. Then came asses laden with spoils, a thousand and more of them, under special guards. Then camels. Then the cattle – grey with frost, thin, and wretched. The bulls rolled their bloodshot eyes and tried to make off into the forest; but the drovers turned them back with spears. There were black plasters of flies on the animals' wounded flanks. The hearts of the watching herdsmen were filled with indignation and fury.

'I cannot see our baldhead,' Hibal complained in a whisper. Ab-Ram shook his head impatiently. They were not there to win back flocks and herds. The cattle passed, and innumerable sheep came along, bleating miserably. When would there be an end to this procession? He looked anxiously at the sky. Soon the evening halt would be called, and they would have to wait in ambush yet another night.

The flocks and herds passed, and more soldiers arrived. A strong force of picked bowmen closed the procession. The track was undisturbed by any sound, nothing more was coming. The dust settled back on the road. The sky was crimson. In a moment or two dusk would be falling.

'Where are the prisoners? Where are the prisoners?' the lurking men asked one another feverishly. 'Have they been sent by another road? Or murdered? Or did they pass unnoticed among that mass of soldiers?' Ab-Ram felt desperate; he did not know what to do. Hibal offered to ride along the track by which the soldiers had come. Perhaps the prisoners were exhausted and could not keep up with the main body, and so they had been halted earlier for the night?

He rode off. Ab-Ram and Eliezer waited. There was complete silence around them save for the whine of jackals, and the sound of wild goats and sheep making their way down to the stream. The animals snorted as they scented the presence of the lurking men. In the distance the roar of a lion was heard. And then above these nocturnal sounds rose the drumming of a hurrying ass. Hibal was returning.

'I have found them, my lord!' he cried. 'I have found them. They are halted not far from here. Merchants have come out from Laïs, Hoby and Damascus, and are buying the slaves. We must hurry.'

Out of the forest undergrowth slipped the dark figures summoned by Ab-Ram's whistle. They sped like spirits along the broad, well-trodden road, slowing down only when they saw the light of numerous torches in the distance.

The bargaining that was going on amid the silence of the night was, in fact, strictly forbidden. Prisoners were the king's own property, and he alone had the right to sell them, or to employ them wherever he wished. Yet not only the centurions, but individual soldiers were anxious to get their share of the profit. When everybody is in the conspiracy, who will betray it? Even the all-knowing, suspicious *melek melakim* would not know whether a slave had been sold, or had died of exhaustion on the road. So many had already fallen during that march, leaving their bones to the crows and hyenas; another hundred could easily be lost. The secret sale of slaves was such a widespread activity that merchants would wait on the road of returning soldiers, knowing they could buy slaves more cheaply direct from them than in the royal market.

No one was guarding the crowd of prisoners, for every soldier wanted to profit from the sale of at least one of their victims. Everywhere in the shadows could be heard whispers, inciting smacks of the lips, contemptuous exclamations, ending in the slapping of hands together to mark the successful completion of a transaction. The objects of this chaffering, the mortally weary prisoners, were lying on the ground, indifferent to all that was going on around them, indifferent even to the kicks of the soldiers, forcing them to their feet. They could not imagine any change for the better coming to them. Death seemed easier than life.

No one took any notice of Ab-Ram's men as they arrived on the scene. Of course they must be new merchants. In a hurry, but that was understandable. But then. . . O, ye god^d! Were they men, or demons? They lashed out with clubs in the darkness, they jabbed with spears, they slashed with swords. The merchants fled in panic. Terror robbed the faithless, dishonest guards of any control over their limbs. Surely it was the king of Babylon who had come back unexpectedly and caught them! He would exact terrible punishment for their perfidy. He would impale them on poles, or order them to be flayed alive. The astonished centurions were terror-stricken, and allowed the attackers to tie them up like sheep. When they recovered from their fright it was too late to resist.

Here and there the bowmen realised their error. They shouted to one another to concentrate forces, and tried to put up a united stand. But their abandoned shields were lying beyond their reach, they had nothing to protect their heads against the shepherds' rain of blows. Those that were not killed outright put their flocks in the noose without further resistance.

Ab-Ram snatched up a torch and waved it into flame. He ran along

the rows of stupefied, terrified prisoners. His white cloak streamed out like a great wing behind him as he sought the son of his brother.

'Here he is! Here he is!' Hibal shouted. Ab-Ram ran up to him, and held the torch close to the face of the man Hibal was indicating. This yellow, emaciated man, who had difficulty in straightening his limbs - was this Lot? He recognised his liberator, and sobbed:

'Uncle! Uncle Ab-Ram!'

'Bless the Lord who has saved you,' Ab-Ram retorted, and walked swiftly away, both to hide his deep emotion and because he was needed everywhere. If even one soldier escaped and informed the soldiers encamped not far away of what was happening, they would all perish. They must retire as quickly as possible. He decided to set the released prisoners on the asses and camels. But the bound soldiers . . . what was to be done with them?

Standing a little apart, a crowd of men was lamenting and cursing in the darkness. They were the merchants, whom Eshcol's men had prevented from fleeing. Terror-stricken, they swore by their merchants' consciences that they were innocent. They had not fallen on anyone; they had not fought anyone. . . . They had come to buy prisoners.

Then Ab-Ram had a capital idea. They had come to buy prisoners? Excellent! They would find the commodities they were seeking. Let them buy the soldiers on the spot. Let them pay and then depart with their acquisitions.

The merchants liked the proposition. They recovered their wits and assumed their customary gravity. They were not astonished by the change in the individual commodity, it was by no means the first time a man preparing fetters for others had himself been caught in them. And obviously they much preferred a lusty, well-fed soldier to an emaciated prisoner.

Before the transaction was concluded and the price fixed, Ab-Ram asked Lot which was the overseer who had beaten him. Lot reluctantly pointed to a sturdy fellow with the dull, flat face of a Gutian. Ab-Ram drew his short sword from his belt and handed it to the son of Haran, saying:

'Kill him.'

'Kill him?' The tortured, half-dead Hebrew turned his head away in protest. He had no desire to kill anyone. So without a word Ab-Ram raised his arm and struck with the point of the sword at the prisoner's

breast. The point ran deep into the body. The blood spurted out. The man fell to the ground, writhed convulsively, and expired.

Only then were the merchants astonished. Hitherto they had quite understood what was happening, but this they could not understand. Why kill a soldier, when you could get a good price for him? Nobody could get anything out of a corpse. A corpse was of value only to the hyenas and jackals.

Ab-Ram withdrew his sword from the man's body and wiped it on the grass.

'He who insults a free Hebrew has no right to live,' he declared. Now he felt that he had accomplished the task to which he had set his hand.

The price for the slaves was soon settled. The merchants handed Ab-Ram bag after bag of shekels. A few moments later the king of Babylon's fine soldiers, tied in tens, vanished into the darkness as humble slaves, driven off by their new masters. There was no fear now that any of them would try to escape and inform the king. He would be cut down in the attempt.

No one would ever tell Hammurabi of the incident in the glade not far from the city of *Lais*, so long as the *melek melakim* himself did not inquire about the captives. And then the *tartan*, the commander-in-chief of his army, would tell him the prisoners had been snatched away by demons, or that they had started to revolt and it had been necessary to kill them all off, or they had succumbed to an epidemic. . . .

'All of them?' the son of *Šin-Muballit* would ask suspiciously.

'Live for ever, my lord. All of them.'

Ab-Ram overflowed with happy laughter. He felt all the joy of triumph, and at the same time an inexpressible feeling of gratitude to the All-Highest. The enterprise before which he had trembled, the enterprise which had seemed an act of madness, had proved childishly easy. He had lost not one man. So all he need do was to dare to fulfil his obligations and have confidence in the Lord. The Lord Himself did the rest, straightened the road, eliminated the obstacles. He was a powerful, almighty Protector.

By the light of torches Ab-Ram's men eliminated all traces of the struggle. If some of the rearguard should happen to turn back to hasten the laggards they would not discover what had happened, or even how far the guards and prisoners had come. Then they set off. Ab-Ram walked beside the ass on which Lot was seated. From time to time his nephew

leaned across to whisper thanks to his uncle. Ab-Ram smiled gravely in the darkness.

'Will you return to me, son of my brother?' he asked.

'I shall return,' Lot assented gratefully.

The man seated behind Lot on the same ass breathed heavily and sighed, to let it be understood that he was very weary and would like to rest. Ab-Ram took no notice of his snorts, for prudence commanded that they should get away as quickly as possible. Only when they reached the farther side of the river would they hide in the forest and rest for several days, to give the exhausted prisoners a chance to gather their strength.

They reached the shallow but swiftly rushing river at dawn. Both the barks were hidden in milky mist. The camels snorted as they entered the chilly water. A penetrating, healthy rain came on from the neighbouring hills. They pitched their camp in a glade trodden out in the thicket by wild boars, far from the routes used by merchant caravans. The asses and camels grazed in the vicinity, the released captives lay on the grass, sleeping and recovering from their past miseries. Ab-Ram recalled that Hibal had spoken of women and children being driven into captivity with the men, and he inquired what had become of them, for they had not rescued one. Lot explained that they had all died of exhaustion and emaciation on the road. It always happened so. Ab-Ram had released over five hundred men, but several thousand had been driven off from the south. The route along which Hammurabi's victorious expedition had marched was marked by the bones of the victims. They had fallen of hunger and thirst like flies. The food assigned for their maintenance had been stolen by the centurions. The prisoners had marched tied together in tens, and if one of them died the others had to drag the body along for the rest of the day, as the rigid, dusty remains were untied only in the evening. 'I often felt envious of the dead,' Lot said, 'for the Babylonian guards no longer had any authority over them. I regretted that I was stronger than others, and so would suffer torments longer.'

Hibal (no longer a servant, for Lot had at once given him his freedom) with several other men, went to the city of Lais to buy food. Ab-Ram ordered them to listen carefully to what the people were saying, and to discover whether there was any rumour that the prisoners had been released. He commanded them to be extremely cautious and to flee in the opposite direction from the camp if they were followed. But a couple of

days later they returned in great good humour, bringing sacks of flour and driving a small flock of sheep before them. In the city they had heard no talk of the incident, though many made reference to the march of the Babylonian's innumerable army. Evidently it was not in any one's interest to spread the story of the adventure. It certainly was not to the interest of the merchants, or of the former bowmen who were now working in the bakeries or the mills.

Ab-Ram was reassured, and it occurred to him that from this spot it was nearer to Harran than to his own camp. He summoned Eliezer:

'Hearken diligently to what I say,' he began. 'You will go to Harran to visit my brother Nahor. You will tell him all that has happened to me since the day I left him. Greet him from me with my brotherly greeting, and do honour to the grave of my father, Terah son of Nahor. If it has happened that during the past years my brother, Nahor son of Terah has died - for he was not strong - do honour to his grave also, and bring his widow Milcah to us. Thus do. As you return I give you permission to halt in Damascus, for it is your native city. You may spend there as much time as your soul desires.'

Eliezer fell at his master's feet, then set off on his journey.

Next morning the crowd of former prisoners came to Ab-Ram to ask what he intended to do with them. To sell them as slaves, or to retain them as servants? He had saved their lives, and he had become the lord of their existence. They belonged to him. Perhaps he would be prepared to accept a ransom? Until their families had gathered the sum he stipulated, they would faithfully serve him.

Ab-Ram shook his head.

'I set out from my house not for profit,' he replied, 'but to rescue the son of my brother. You are free, and you can go in peace whither you wish.'

'Blessings be on thy head!' they exclaimed in fervent gratitude. 'Allow us to remain with you for a few days longer, Ab-Ram, and then we will return to our own places.'

'I think you will accept from me the payment due to you, Ab-Ram son of Terah,' the man who had ridden with Lot on the ass pushed forward. 'I am Bera son of Henos, King of Sodom and lord of all the valley of Siddim. . . .'

(The one who fell into the slime-pit, Ab-Ram recalled.)

'Greetings, king of Sodom,' he replied. 'I cannot accept payment from

you since as I said, I did not set out in the hope of gain. I have goods enough of my own.'

As he spoke he took a good look at the king. The man Hibal had described as very obese had gone very thin during the days of his captivity. His skin hung in folds on his face. He reminded Ab-Ram of his brother Nahor; but whereas Nahor's face had always remained intelligent and pleasant, the king of Sodom had crafty eyes and cruel, sensual lips.

'Not often does it happen that a man can save a king,' Bera continued with great arrogance. 'If you catch a golden bird some of the gold sticks to your fingers. I would not have you say that it is all one whether you save a king or a shepherd.'

'I have not caught you, king of Sodom, I have only set you free; and my palms do not itch for gold.'

Bera son of Henos was astonished.

'I understand what you are thinking, son of Terah,' he declared. 'You see me humbled, like a dead dog, or a flea, and unable to make you any reward. I know that today I am to be regarded as a beggar. But once I return to my capital I will open a hand filled with munificent gifts. My soul expects that when you will not refuse.'

Without waiting for Ab-Ram to reply, he added:

'Grant me, I pray you, one more favour. Lend me several camels, strong and swift, that I may hasten to Sodom. I desire to be the first to arrive there, in order to take vengeance on the high priest El-Gad and those who deserted me.' The king's little eyes glittered ominously.

'I will willingly lend you camels,' Ab-Ram assented. Lot led his uncle to one side.

'Why will you not take a just reward from the son of Henos?' he asked regretfully. 'He has as much gold as the king of Egypt, or even more, well concealed. Take it.'

'I do not need his gold. I am not interested in it.'

'You are not interested in it?' His nephew repeated. His tone astonished Ab-Ram.

'Do you set so much value on gold, then?' he asked.

'Of a surety, more than on life,' Lot said bitterly.

Bera son of Henos was the first to leave the forest glade for the south. Soon after Eshcol and Aner with their men followed him. Before the king of Sodom's departure he had assured them of his generous intentions,

but Ab-Ram gave them one-third of the money the merchants had paid for the Babylonian soldiers. The remainder he distributed to his own men. The released prisoners were already dispersing, each to his own place. Only Ab-Ram and his tribesmen remained encamped in the vicinity of Lais, ignoring the oncoming of the rainy season and the possibility of danger from the Babylonian. This delay was caused by Lot's serious state of debility. While a prisoner the son of Haran had fallen sick, but when released he had improved a little and had thought to master his weakness; but it proved stronger than he. The wounds inflicted by the fetters on his wrists and ankles festered, his hands and feet swelled. Fever racked his body. He shivered with cold and burned with heat; one moment he was lying still, helpless, streaming with sweat; the next he was tossing and talking incessantly. He called for his daughters, he was afraid for them, tried to defend them from something, promised gold. . . . To whom? Ab-Ram felt very depressed as he sat beside the sick man. He did not know what to do to bring him relief. Sarai, Noa or Resa would have known how to apply hot oil to his chest, to set pungent powdered beetles to his soles, to make him cooling drinks when the fever increased, and warming ones when the body grew cold. Hibal, as afflicted as Ab-Ram, repeated in an undertone as he watched at his master's feet:

'We need tablets with spells to give my master relief. I would go to the city, buy a good powerful tablet, and heal my master. . . . But how can my soul do this when I have nothing with which to pay for the tablet? Can I obtain one for nothing?'

So whispering, he took surreptitious glances at Ab-Ram, in the hope that he would hear, would untie the wallet hanging at his belt, and say: 'Here is silver. Go and buy an effective spell.' But Ab-Ram sat motionless. Truly, he heard and understood what was in Hibal's mind, but he was weary of repeatedly assuring people that tablets were not necessary where the Lord Most High had extended His care. He was not believed; he was continually being asked for tablets and spells; his fellow tribesmen felt regretful that their chief was depriving them of the one effective defence against demons. Now, as he sat beside his nephew, he recalled how he had once bought a spell for Terah son of Nahor when he was suffering with ague. As though it were only yesterday he could see the hucksters gathered under the gateway of the city of Ur, and then the worthy master Taribal reigning among innumerable spells of every kind. At that time Ab-Ram had believed in them, just like others. It had not caused him astonishment

that a malevolent demon or a god demanding sacrifice should be subject to the power of a spell. If the tablet was undamaged, if the words inscribed on it were still potent, and if they were said without terror and without taking breath, both god and demon must listen to man's command. So they must be weaker than he.

That was not so with the Lord, who was obeyed by heaven and earth, by time and the abyss. He was subject to no one, no spell restrained His will, no one ruled over Him. In His presence the skill of master Taribal, the industrious labour of the workers he employed, were a useless working of the clay, and in fact of a lower order than the labour of a potter; for clay made into pots is of service to man, while the costly spell tablets served only to enrich those who made them. Did they also believe in them? Ab-Ram had long felt doubtful in regard to the priests, and a hint by Sep-Sin had confirmed his belief that the servants of the gods were themselves gods who with the aid of omens imposed their own and not another's will on man. The position was similar in regard to the writers of spells and the sellers of tablets. Ab-Ram had thought he discerned a derisive smile beneath the mask of gravity that covered master Taribal's face, and he was seized with a belated anger against the great conspiracy of the swindlers who held the world in the fetters of fear, who battered on universal credulity. The struggle against them was no easy one, they were assured of rule for a long time to come. After all, he, too, would have remained under their authority if the Lord Himself had not snatched him up by his hair one day, and opened his eyes.

He caught Hibal's imploring gaze fixed on him, and heard him continually muttering his refrain; and he gave him a friendly nod.

'Grieve not, Hibal,' he said hurriedly, as though someone else were speaking for him. 'The son of Haran will recover, not by the power of the clay tablet, but by the will of the Lord Most High.'

He bent over Lot, to find that he was sleeping quietly for the first time in many days.

The convalescent was still weak, but the lateness of the season did not permit of their waiting till he was restored to strength. He and Ab-Ram rode on the one camel, Lot sitting behind, with his arms round his uncle's waist, as he had done often when he was a small boy. Despite his returning health he was continually in low spirits. Their close proximity was favourable to intimate conversation, and Ab-Ram asked why he was sad.

'I curse my illness, which did not allow me to ride to Sodom with the king,' Lot replied. 'I am afraid he may take vengeance on those who sheltered in the temple. Bera son of Henos is a cruel and evil man.'

At the very first words Ab-Ram shifted energetically in the saddle.

'Son of Haran, you promised to remain with me. What would you wish to ride to Sodom for?'

'For my wife and children,' Lot replied calmly.

Ab-Ram drew in a whistling breath through his lips. He felt like openly repeating Hibal's opinion and declaring that he had no desire to see Edith in his camp. But he felt sorry for this man leaning intimately and helplessly against his back, so he restrained himself and said:

'I have heard that there is no understanding between you, son of Haran, and your wife Edith.'

'There is no understanding,' Lot admitted with a sigh. 'But the obligation remains. And there are the children. I am anxious for my children, Uncle Ab-Ram. Bera son of Henos is a very evil, very cruel man. He regards everybody whom the priests favoured as his enemy. My daughters are of tender age, but they are beautiful to behold. Especially the younger. Sometimes even her mother looks at her sidelong, with envy. I am afraid lest they should suffer wrong. . . .'

'Daughters. . . .' Ab-Ram gave a contemptuous snort. His tone signified that there was nothing to worry about.

Lot did not yield:

'My blood is in them. I am fond of them.'

He gripped his uncle's waist more firmly.

'Sometimes it seems to me, Uncle Ab-Ram,' he confessed, 'that we are too regardless of women. Is it really just that we should consider them equal with the beasts? Every man is born of woman, and blesses the woman that bore him.'

'Neither my father Terah son of Nahor, nor your father Haran son of Terah, neither you, nor I, established the law. Lasting ever since the Flood and even before, it is just and wise. Would you wish to revolt against the law?'

Lot pressed more closely to his uncle. "

'Your servant would not dare to revolt against the law, and yet it is harsh. The man who in the maturity of his days makes the world to tremble, when he was a child would have perished without his mother,

like a chick turned out of the nest. For two years her breast is in his mouth, his arms are like a yoke round her neck. After so many labours, what recompense has the woman?

Ab-Ram was astonished at Lot's words. It had never occurred to him that his nephew occupied his mind with such questions. He felt like replying in a superior tone that her very labour to rear the future man was sufficient recompense for the woman. But events long, long past came to life again in his mind: he saw Nergal-Sar's chamber, the fleeting pictures of his vision, a woman crowned with stars. So he said nothing. And he remembered that he had himself once or twice acted at variance with the prescriptions of the law, so he held his peace all the more.

'I have heard unbecoming things of your wife Edith,' he began again, after a long silence.

Lot drew himself up and went rigid.

'Edith is no worse than others,' he declared. 'Women readily follow after every new thing. Accursed is the city of Sodom in which we live; I wish it were destroyed! The people are indolent, for the earth brings forth of itself. No one works, except the servants. Though they are rich, the people always have too little gold, and esteem only the man who possesses much gold. The man without gold is like a leper among them, he is kicked and derided. In their excess, in their boredom, their blood rots within them. They delight in luxury. They pour perfumes over their couches. Cinnamon, balsam, nard, myrrh, and scented rushes. Slaves crush all these together in mortars. Wine from the grapes is too weak for them, they drink strong date wine and add stimulating roots to it. They go about always drunk and inflamed, like dogs chasing a bitch. The women are as bad as the men, or even worse. They do not respect the law. The son sleeps with his mother, the daughter with her father, brother with sister, grandfather with grand-daughter. . . .'

'What filth are you telling me, son of Haran?' Ab-Ram burst out angrily.

'It is evil that I tell of, truly, for among them it is more and more uncommon for man to have intercourse with woman as is natural. For sensual indulgence a man has intercourse with a man, a woman with a woman. They boast of it as if it were a virtue. . . .'

'Death to the abominable ones!' Ab-Ram hissed in horror. 'Know they not the law? Their blood will fall on them.'

'They laugh at the law. They say it was not written for them. . . . They

believe themselves to be wiser and more illustrious than anyone else in the world.'

'I myself would help the Babylonian to destroy them,' Ab-Ram muttered passionately.

'Son of Terah, even that is not all. I have not yet told of their greatest abomination. . . . In order to satisfy their lust. . . .'

He lay on his uncle's shoulder and whispered the terrible thing into his ear. The older man's face went dark with shame and aversion.

'Silence!' he burst out. 'Silence! Lest I forget who you are that is speaking. Vengeance! Vengeance on the defilers! May they perish! The carrion! May flame burn them up! May their soul be turned away as in the drive and turn of a sling! May their bodies not find any grave! May they be accursed. . . .'

He broke off, out of breath; but after a moment his anger boiled up again, this time against his nephew.

'And you? You? You have lived in such a nest? Have you grown like unto them? Do you take pleasure in their abominations? Why did you not shake your sandals on their threshold and return to me?'

'From the day I said farewell to you, uncle, and we swore to you on the mound that I would not pass it westward, there has not been a dawn or a dusk that I have not yearned for your tent. But it was difficult for me to return. . . .'

He was too ashamed to admit that Edith would not hear of her own or her daughters' departure from Sodom, and that he could not bear to part from the children.

'I can guess what detained you,' Ab-Ram said with contempt in his tone. 'You have a heart and a mind, son of Haran; but you have never been a man, nor ever will be. . . .'

He felt a moist warmth on his back, and felt with his hand. Lot was weeping, and his tears were streaming down behind his uncle's cloak.

'There is water, not blood, in your veins,' Ab-Ram snorted contemptuously. 'Remember what I say: if you do not return to me by the next new moon I shall regard you as unclean, as equal with those. I have spoken.'

Lot made no answer, and they rode on for a long time without conversing, swaying to the stride of the camel. Ab-Ram was inwardly furious, unable to control the loathing that had possessed him after his nephew's revelations. He recalled from youthful days how his father,

Terah, who knew all the secrets of life unknown to shepherds, had hinted to his son that there were monstrous and infamous human habits so repulsive that no words could convey their obscenity. The fruit of such habits were the beings, in shape half horse, half men, who hid in the inaccessible mountains; or the men who had the heads of bulls. Terah son of Nahor had never seen such creatures himself, he had only heard of them; and Ab-Ram had been inclined to regard these stories as legends. But here was an inconceivable abomination really spuming, born of surfeit and indolence, stinking like carrion, as humiliating as death inflicted by a hyena. Kill the abominators! Burn them up, let not a trace be left of their loathsomeness! As he raged he went cold at the memory of the time when his own feet had stood on the sloping track which led into a similar slough. He shuddered violently, so violently that Lot was alarmed.

'What is the matter, uncle?' he asked timidly.

'My soul was torn within me with anxiety,' Ab-Ram sorrowfully replied.

Once more they rode in silence. Ab-Ram reflected that the concubine's caresses to which he had succumbed were far from the depravity of the Sodomites. But who knows the fleetness of the body which has been permitted to depart from the right road? Perhaps it was not such a great distance, after all? Woe, woe to the man when he begins to do something of which he is ashamed!

The hurried clatter of ass hooves interrupted his meditations. The men in the rear cried out cheerfully, welcoming someone they recognised. It was Eliezer. Though he was expected only after the rainy season he had overtaken them as they journeyed. Drawing level with Ab-Ram's camel, he shouted at the top of his voice: 'Live for ever, my lord! Your brother, Nahor son of Terah, has quickened two sons in his wife. He greets you and all the line.'

At the happy news Ab-Ram decided to call a halt. It was not fitting to continue the journey without celebrating such an event properly. Eliezer, worn out, lay down on the ground beside his equally tired ass, and fell asleep immediately. On Ab-Ram's orders Yahiel went off to some shepherds grazing their flocks nearby and asked them to give him two yearling calves and four sheep. In return Ab-Ram would send them lambing sheep and two heifers in calf. His brother had been born two

sons, and he desired to make merry. The shepherds replied: 'We have heard from Eshcol and Aner, who passed this way at the new moon, what Ab-Ram son of Terah has done. We wish no payment from him. Choose the best animals from our herd.' 'Blessed be all thy days!' Yahiel replied, and selected the beasts he required. By the fall of evening all the tribesmen were lying round the camp fire, greedily eating the savoury-smelling, baked meats. The lambs were young and fat, the calves tender, and the Hebrews had eaten nothing but dried dates and barley cakes since they set out on the expedition. So, as they ate they praised Nahor son of Terah, and Ab-Ram his brother. When their first hunger was met and they were eating more slowly, only for the delight of eating, and licking their greasy fingers, Ab-Ram called on Eliezer to begin his story. The old servant had been waiting impatiently for this moment, and immediately, wiping his lips with the edge of his hand, spoke up so that all could hear.

'Good news is like fresh water,' he began. 'Your servant, my lord, hobbled his ass at the gate of the city of Hartan and left it to graze, and then went to the house in which you had buried your father, Terah son of Nahor. I raised my hand to knock, but then I noticed a crimson ribbon hanging at the window frame. Your servant returned to the city gate and asked the people trading there: "Where lives Nahor son of Terah, the Hebrew?" They told me the house, but it was the same house before which I had already stood. I thought the demon of weariness must have tricked my eyes, and I returned to the door; but the crimson ribbon was hanging and swaying in the wind. I returned again to the gate and asked the hucksters: "Surely a crimson ribbon on a house signifies that twins have been born?" They answering said: "Certainly it is as you say. Go to Nahor the Hebrew and rejoice with him, since in his later years he has quickened two sons." My heart shook with joy, and with great eagerness I hastened to the market, to buy cakes and the vessels which we give to children. I did not think about the price, and bought copper mugs with platters, all gilded and carved. I laid the cakes on them, and also all the gold which my lord had given me, and then I went and knocked at the door. Nahor son of Terah himself opened to me and cried out with joy. And he ran like a youth into the house, where his wife, Milcah, was sitting with the children; and your servant followed after him, holding the platters and the mugs in my hand. I laid them at the feet of Milcah your sister, son of Haran, and began to congratulate them and rejoice.

The children are very fine, strong boys, they are six months old. They are called Buz and Kemuel. When they cry they can be heard in the street. Nahor's wife, Milcah, is white and fat. Her eyes are bright and she is always laughing. Nahor son of Terah is grey-haired and stately, he is not so fat as he was. He walks well, and briskly. "Blessings be on my brother," he said, "for bringing me here out of the city of Ur, for here the mountain air is cool and healthy, and I shall live many years and add still further sons to my wife." So he spoke, and Milcah looked at him with joy. And then, after bowing once more to Buz and Kenuel, the sons of Nahor, I went into the courtyard, there to do honour to the grave of my lord's father. I saw that it is kept in great honour. Nahor son of Terah told me that every year, when the same stars appear in the sky that were shining when my lord's father died, he summons the priests, who make offerings of milk, honey, and wine, of lambs and doves, before the teraphim. The teraphim stand in the courtyard, beside the tomb of Terah son of Nahor. Nahor burns resin before them every day. . . . I, too, burnt resin, kneeling.

Wearied, he lapsed into silence, and there fell a deep silence, filled with all the tribe's yearning to possess teraphim, to be able to make sacrifices of wine, milk, lambs and doves to these guardians of the life, and to burn incense before them. Of a truth Ab-Ram had his god, but no one knew him. He seemed foreign and remote, so remote and so foreign that it was as if he did not exist at all. What was a god whose very name was not known?

'Go on with your story, Eliezer, Ab-Ram invited me.

'With gladness will I go on, my lord. Nahor, your brother, inquired into all that had happened to us since our parting from him, and I talked all that day till evening, and then the next day from morning till evening. They were greatly astonished when they heard that your wife, Sarai, had been taken by Pharaoh, and then returned to you. But when I said that the son of Haran no longer dwells with us, Milcah shook her head and said: "I knew it would be so. I knew! I warned your lord Ab-Ram even when we were still at Ur." But Nahor said after his manner: "Born bald, die bald." And also: "The daw changeth not his voice among the quails." May my lord forgive me, may my lord's nephew forgive me if I repeat too boldly. . . .

'Tell all you heard, Eliezer.'

'Your brother Nahor rejoiced when he heard of our expedition against

the Babylonian, and clapped his hands. "The son of Sin-Mu¹ballit,' he said, "is ~~as~~ insatiable as a leech, death, fire, and parched earth. Praise be to Ab-Ram that he did not abandon his blood. . . . Fortune favours the brave, setting snares for the timid." Milcah wept over you, her brother, son of Haran, and glorified my lord. And she sent greetings for Sarai, and gifts, which I have in a bag. . . ."

"Did you say that I, too, have a son?" Ab-Ram asked.

"Certainly, your servant told them. I said that Ishmael is handsome and strong, and like Ab-Ram son of Terah. Nahor asked: "Who is nurturing the child? My brother's wife, or the Egyptian bondswoman?" I told them how it was."

"What else did my brother Nahor say?"

"Nahor, thinking, said: "The full man is dainty over honey, but the hungry thinks mustard is sweet." He always talks in riddles. I know not what his riddle referred to."

"Why did you not halt in your native city, Damascus, on your return journey?" asked Ab-Ram, concealing the unpleasant impression his brother's words had made on him.

"Your servant was in great haste to bring you the good news as soon as possible, so I did not halt at all, especially as . . ."

He stopped short, unwilling to mention that all the good Ab-Ram had given him had been spent on gifts for Buz and Kemuel, the sons of Nahor, and that it was difficult for him to seek out his kinsmen in Damascus when he had not a shekel to his soul.

Ab-Ram understood his silence. 'Blessed be the Lord Who has given me a faithful servant,' he declared. 'Blessed be the Lord Who has given me a friend in my servant.'

The tears came to Eliezer's eyes. He bowed down to Ab-Ram's feet.

"One other thing your brother Nahor said to me concerning you," he suddenly recalled. "They are difficult words, but I set them to myself twice over and remembered them. He said: "As an eagle spreads its wings over its chicks preparing to fly, so is the God of Ab-Ram over my brother."'

Bread and Wine

THE RETINUE OF THE KING OF SODOM, WHO RODE OUT TO MEET AB-RAM, fell in with the Hebrew force a day and half's journey from their camp, close to the city of Uru-Salem, which was built on precipitous hills. Bera son of Helios rode out in pomp, desiring to evoke an admiration that should wipe out the memory of him as one of the prisoners driven in fetters. He was preceded by a detachment of bowmen bearing shields covered with gilded leather, and quivers of purple leather. The bowmen were followed by musicians, blowing mightily into pipes and bagpipes, and strumming lutes and harps. The camel carrying the king had a broad golden collar round its neck, and a golden net over its head; a coloured cloth hung from its back to the ground on either side, the golden fringes of the cloth dragged over the grass. A baldachim glistening with gold and stretched from the points of four spears protected the royal head against sun and dust. Two black slaves led the camel, a third walked behind, carrying the king's sceptre on a crimson cushion. He was followed by the court dignitaries, on camels attired as magnificently, but without baldachims. Then came a rather disorderly crowd of men and women palace attendants. Beautiful, naked girls robed in transparent muslin, Egyptian fashion, were carried in litters, whence they exchanged banter with the men riding beside them, and provoked the bowmen who brought up the rear. The musicians played with all their strength; an indescribable tumult accompanied the procession.

A look of disgust came over Ab-Ram's face; he halted his camel.

'My eyes have no desire to see that obscenity of a king,' he said, and spat.

Lot, who was sitting behind him, implored him:

'Uncle, have pity on my soul! If you show contempt for him, he will take vengeance on me and my children.'

'I will hold my peace,' Ab-Ram angrily promised him. He dismounted

from the camel and, when the royal procession was close enough, bowed gravely, without abasing himself. The camel carrying Bera son of Henos knelt down, the king scrambled off it and walked graciously towards Ab-Ram. He looked cheerful, his features were shining like oil, the stupefying scent of perfumes came from his garments. Ab-Ram had a vivid recollection of all that Lot had told him of the Sodomites' customs, and he maintained his calm with difficulty.

'You have been delayed, Ab-Ram son of Terah, my blessed saviour,' Bera said in a voice hoarse with excess of drink. 'I was afraid the men I had commanded to watch for your return had overlooked you, so I set out myself. . . .'

'Your servant has not deserved so great consideration,' Ab-Ram said.

'I was in haste to show my due gratitude,' Bera answered. 'I have brought the gold I intend for you on two asses. . . .'

'Great is your generosity, but I have no need of anything.'

'You refuse it?' Bera was amazed. He looked more closely, only now noticing the coldness of Ab-Ram's demeanour, and his face clouded.

'Deign to send part of the gift intended for me to Eshcol and Aner, my confederates. They dwell not far from here, close to the oak grove called the grove of Mamre. For myself I desire nothing.'

'You do not need gold? Perhaps you would prefer arms, or raiment? Speak boldly.'

'Neither gold, nor weapons, nor raiment do I need. I will not take from a thread to a shoe-latchet, lest you should say: "I have made Ab-Ram rich. . . ."'

'Uncle!' Lot implored him.

Ab-Ram again put a curb on himself. Bera son of Henos was astonished. It was the first time in his life he had met with such a refusal. He did not know whether to be angry, or whether he had to do with a madman. He tried to jest:

'Surely you do not desire me to give you my royal capital?'

Ab-Ram was about to retort that he would rather be king of the jackals than possess such a capital; but Lot's eyes, fixed on him in alarm and despair, caused him to hold his peace.

'Of a truth, king, I desire nothing except one thing: Show, I pray you, favour to my nephew, the son of Harai, whose family will remain in your city. . . .'

'My amity will accompany him. He will find in me shade in the heat

and a cloak in the rainy season,' the king assured him. He grew very cheerful, realising that Ab-Ram did not wish to offend him, and that he could take his gold back to his palace.

They mounted their camels and rode in accord southward. The king leaned out from beneath his baldachim and talked incessantly, quite unoffended by Ab-Ram's silence. Lot asked whether he could attach himself to the king's retinue, to which Bera readily assented.

'Take my camel,' Ab-Ram told his nephew. 'I will journey further on an ass.'

'By the breasts and thighs of the goddess!' the king suddenly exclaimed. 'You are famous, Ab-Ram son of Terah. Behold my neighbour, Melchizedek, the king of the city Uru-Salem, is coming out to meet you. I thought that nothing could draw that badger from his burrow.'

He pointed to a little throng of people emerging from a ravine between the hills, truly as though from a badger's burrow.

'I know not the king of that city,' Ab-Ram flew into a passion. He was furious, for his one desire was to return to his camp as quickly as possible, without seeing any kings. He already felt dislike for this unknown newcomer.

They halted on the road, and waited. Bera son of Honos stared derisively at the poverty of the approaching group. It included no musicians, nor coloured raiment, nor armed soldiers. But as it drew nearer Ab-Ram opened his eyes wide, and no longer desired to ride away. Leading it was a man of impressive stature, grey-haired, a royal golden fillet on his head, and attired in a white cloak astonishingly similar to the one which covered Ab-Ram's own shoulders. He jumped down from his camel without waiting for it to kneel, and hastened to meet the approaching king.

'In the Name of the Lord Most High, I greet thee, Ab-Raham,' the stranger said in a grave, strong voice.

Ab-Ram was as embarrassed as a stripling.

'Greetings, king Melchizedek,' he stammered, not taking his gaze from the cloak. 'I am called Ab-Ram son of Terah. What has thy servant done that thou shouldst come out to me?'

'I have waited for thee a long time, Ab-Raham. I accompanied thee in thought when thou didst journey forth to rescue thy blood.'

'My name is Ab-Ram son of Terah,' the Hebrew corrected him again, fearfully.

'There are times when the name grows with the man. . . . Come with me, to make a sacrifice to the Most High God.'

Without a glance at the affronted king of Sodom, abandoning his anxious nephew, Ab-Ram obediently followed Melchizedek. He walked as if in his sleep. The two white cloaks blended in one. Ab-Ram's men, uncertain what to do, followed their master at a distance. Lot remained with the king of Sodom. After a while the jingling tones of bells and lutes indicated that Bera son of Henos had departed.

Indifferent to everything surrounding him, Ab-Ram pondered on the significance of this mysterious meeting. He was terrified by the change in his name. The man's name is an inseparable part of him. In it lurks the strength that maintains him in life, and it confers the characteristics contained in its sound. Ab-Ram's name signified: 'high father'. It meant that the owner of that name towered over his tribe like a father over children, like a palm over the thorn bushes in the valley of Kadēsh. It laid on him the obligation to be a shining example of prudence and righteous judgement, it bound him to take watchful and anxious care. That was much, but it did not exceed the conception. The name Ab-Raham, which was persistently repeated by the unknown king in the white cloak who had greeted him in the name of the Most High God, signified 'the Father of Many, the Father of all People, of all Nations'; and the pictures the name evoked were such that Ab-Ram felt humbled, unworthy. And he trembled.

The sounds of music died away. The king and Ab-Ram went in silence up a rocky ravine rising steeply towards the summit on which the city was built. The sides of the hill dropped away in sheer precipices, rendering the city difficult of access. A low pass linked one hill, crowned by a wall, with another, also walled. Together they dominated the surrounding heights, forming a kind of knot to which ran several chains of hills, as though it were the heart of a stony land.

With his hand Melchizedek pointed to the two hills.

'They are called Ophēl and Moriah,' he said.

Ab-Ram nodded amiably. The names meant nothing to him. He still thought he must be dreaming.

As they went towards the hill-top the view extended more and more spaciouly. The surrounding hills were covered with forests, the valleys were green with the emerald of grass. Only the sisterly heights on which the city of Uru-Salem stood gleamed as bare as a skull, as rock. Beyond

the city, on the further side of the ravine, Ab-Ram could see the dark, exuberant green of olive groves. Unable to discern a river or a lake anywhere, he marvelled that a city had been built in this spot. Cities were usually raised beside water, which is the delight of life. Only far, far away, on the horizon, could a keen eye descry the grey-blue surface of the Salt Lake.

They entered into the shadow of the walls. The gate was of a harsh simplicity, the bolts of bronze, without ornamentation. Ab-Ram marvelled again, for this spot, which in every city is a centre of traffic, was quiet and empty. Only a few hucksters were seated over their baskets of bread and beans. By comparison with the cities he already knew – the wealthy Ur, the beautiful Damascus, the mountainous Harran, the Egyptian Gesem – the city ruled by Melchizedek seemed to be a stony hermitage flung down in the midst of a stony wilderness.

They walked into steep, narrow streets lined with stone houses. They climbed up, then descended again.

'There is the temple,' Melchizedek said, pointing to powerful walls rising on the summit of the hill which he had called Moriah.

The walls were as gray and plain as the surrounding houses. Ab-Ram's heart beat anxiously within him. For the first time in his life he saw a temple of the Lord Most High, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, whose Name and whose features no living man knew. What would he find in it? A throng of gods, altars, and priests, as in the temples of the Chaldees or the Egyptians? He longed that it might not be so. Melchizedek himself opened the gate, and Ab-Ram entered. But he halted in astonishment.

The temple consisted of the hill-top, surrounded by a wall. The sky vaulted above it. In the centre was a sacrificial altar, ancient, and built of great rocks. Surely only a giant could have shifted those rocks and dragged them up the mountain, erecting them in a regular cube? The waters of the Flood had smoothed them, had carried fine sand and the shells of snails into their crevices, in sign that it had washed over this spot. From one side, by smaller rocks laid as a ramp, it was possible without difficulty to reach the top of the altar, where a stone table was set.

Ab-Ram halted, with his men behind him in a half circle. The king-priest went to the altar of rocks, to make the sacrifice. To the Hebrews' growing surprise not one sheep, or heifer, or bullock, was driven to the altar. The sacrifice consisted of bread and wine. The king-priest laid the bread on the altar. He poured out wine from a pewter pitcher. He added resin, set a torch to the altar, then raised his arms upward towards the

open sky. He seemed to be rising into space with the smoke. Thus he prayed until the fire had completely consumed the bread; then he turned to Ab-Ram, calling to him to approach. The son of Terah knelt down, and Melchizedek placed his hand on his head:

'Blessed be thou, Ab-Raham, of the Most High God, possessor of heaven and earth. . . . Glory to the Most High God, whose might delivered thine enemies into thy hand.'

Ab-Ram's men spent the night outside the city, at the bottom of the ravine, gathered round the asses; they realised that it would be warmer there than amid the blustering windiness of the little stone city. On the heights the nights were very cold. They felt disillusioned, and as they talked around the camp fire they unanimously agreed that they should have ridden straight home to their camp, rather than remain the guests of this king-miser and eccentric. 'He did not offer up a single little lamb!' they complained bitterly. 'Not one little goat. The Sodomite was ugly to look at, but he would of a surety have given not less than seven bullocks. . . . And that temple!' They shook their heads contemptuously. They remembered, truly, that their forefathers were said to have worshipped their gods under the bare sky, in lofty spots, called *bamah*; but it was one thing for a shepherd wandering in the wilderness, and quite another for a king in a city. . . . Alas, where were the azure walls of the temple of Ur, covered with painted figures of men, animals, and gods!

Indifferent to the cold, wrapped in their twin cloaks, Ab-Ram and king Melchizedek sat on the roof of a *kibuse* rather loftier than others, and called the royal palace. The building was of only one storey, but it was at the top of the hill, and Ab-Ram reflected that suddenly he had been raised very high, so high that he was nearer to the stars than to the ground. From this distance, closest of all to the heart of things, such loved ones as Ishmael, or Nahor's children, and such repulsive and shocking things as the Sodomites' customs, seemed equally insignificant, distant, hardly worth attention. The only things of importance in all his life were the conversation he had had ten years before, with Nergal-Sar, and the one he had just begun. An hour or two ago he had thought he was dreaming. But now it seemed to him that he had slept through the intervening years and had only just awakened.

'I have been waiting for thee a long time, Ab-Raham,' the king said.

'Call not thy servant by that strange name, which puts fear into my soul. Call me Ab-Ram, as my fathers called me.'

'I will do so since thou wishest it. Thou thyself wilt reach out after that other name when the time comes.'

Ab-Ram shook his head distrustfully. All round them was a silence so profound that the sleeping city might have been inhabited not by people, but by spirits. He asked why this was so.

'The inhabitants of this city are poor; they work hard during the day, and so they sleep at night,' the king explained. 'Merchants never pass through the gate of Uru-Salem with goods, nor do soldiers enter. There is no music, nocturnal amusement, nor singing. This is a harsh spot, but holy and solemn, since here our first parent was buried.'

'Here?' Ab-Ram exclaimed, deeply moved.

'From century to age the tradition has been handed down. No one has found the grave or the revered remains of the first man. The Flood washed over and carried away the soil, leaving the bare rocks; but the report of this has endured. And so, when the times are fulfilled. . . .'

'Ah!' Ab-Ram whispered, as he listened intently; 'My master, Nergal-Sar, whose cloak I wear, also spoke of the fulfilment of the times. . . .'

'When the times are fulfilled,' Melchizedek continued, 'and the Good Shepherd comes for His sheep, His feet will tread here, and not elsewhere. Through the undecorated gate of this city the King of Glory shall come in. . . .'

'Nergal-Sar said that the clouds will let the Righteous One drop with the rain. . . . Is he the same whom you call the Good Shepherd?'

'The same. He will wipe out the guilt of Adam.'

'When will he come? Oh, when?'

'I do not know, Ab-Ram. No one knows the hour or the season in which the time will be fulfilled. It may be tomorrow, it may be after thousands of years. But I believe that we shall all see His day. That hope is nurtured in my bosom.'

'And I, too, will see it?'

'Thou, too, shalt see Him, Ab-Ram.'

The Hebrew sighed, overwhelmed by a feeling of his own pettiness.

'Nergal-Sar,' he whispered, 'was filled with understanding and knowledge, as a skin is filled with mature wine. Thy words, Melchizedek, blossom with wisdom. Why hast thou the Lord set me, an unworthy, simple man, at thy side? Had he none more understanding, more wise, more worthy? What am I?'

The king, who dominated him, because of his height, took in the speaker from above with a priestly gaze.

'That, too, I know not, Ab-Ram. The judgements of the Lord are different from the judgements of men, and the roads of the Lord are far from human roads. I know only, as I gaze into the future, that the Lord on High, revealed to the world, will not be called the God of Abel the Just, nor of Noah saved from the Flood, nor the God of Nergal-Sar, nor the God of Melchizedek, but He will be called the God of Ab-Raham. Many peoples will remember thee and bless thy name. . . .'

'Thou art scoffing at thy miserable servant, Melchizedek, again calling him by a strange and terrible name.'

'I look forward,' the king answered briefly.

'Thou wouldst recall thy words if thou knewest how miserable my servant. The Lord on High has called me and set me before His face, but I have done nothing to His glory. Not even to my fellow tribesmen have I succeeded in revealing His greatness and might. My people still yearn after gods of stone and clay. Their souls desire an image which they can touch, which they can measure and embrace. Recently the servant I sent to my brother, in the northern city of Harlan, returned. When he told how he had done reverence to the teraphim of my tribe, which I had given to my brother, all the people sighed as though in travail and groaned with regret. They want to see. They desire signs.'

Melchizedek seemed not at all astonished.

'That is a human trait,' he admitted. 'Be not surprised, Ab-Ram. Even in the days when all will be revealed and clear, when what we today whisper secretly in the chambers will be proclaimed from the housetops, even then there will be people who love the Lord who will yet say: "Unless I touch him with my hand, I will not believe." Dost thou also not desire that?'

'How would I dare?' Ab-Ram answered vigorously. 'It suffices me that I feel that He is accomplishing the things of the world, that He is governing the stars, the heaven and the depths. I have heard His voice like a storm and wind breaking the cedars. He is terrible. I think that if I saw Him I would be utterly overthrown. It is sufficient for me that He reigns to take care of me, a miserable creature. My anxiety is not that I may see Him, but how to show my gratitude to Him. The servant knows what his lord requires. But I do not know what my Lord requires of me. And I am troubled, because I know not how to honour Him.'

'By obedience to His will. That is what the Lord desires. Obedience is better than sacrifices. Better the incense of a devoted heart than the fatness of sheep. Not to listen to the Lord is to repeat the sin of Adam. It is to puff oneself up with pride against the Creator.'

'So Nergal-Sar said. I desire to obey the Lord. I have sworn by heaven and earth, by fire and by water, that I will always obey Him. But tell me, I pray thee, O Melchizedek, how am I to know the will of the Lord? It is hidden from me. When the Lord speaks my soul is confounded, and His words sound to my simple mind like so many riddles. How am I to know what the Lord desires?'

'Does not wisdom call, and prudence give of its voice? Trust in thine own soul. It will always tell thee whether thy desire is in accordance with the will of the Lord.'

'Thou sayest the truth,' Ab-Ram admitted. He recalled the days when he had kept the white cloak hidden, ostensibly to take better care of it, and all thought of the Lord had vanished from his mind. He had hidden from Him like Adam among the trees of the garden.

'Can I show my gratitude to Him only by obedience?' he asked.

'That which is the greatest of things, thou regardest as too small, Ab-Ram. There is nothing more difficult for a man than to remain always obedient to the will of the Lord.'

Ab-Ram did not share this opinion, but he remained silent, not venturing to object.

'What should I be in order to please the Lord?' he asked again. 'Once, when my father, Terah son of Nahor, entrusted the headship of the tribe to me, I desired to make justice my crown, and to gird myself in righteous judgement as in a garment. But I did not succeed. My justice miscarried, for at times I was moved more by mercy than by justice.'

'For which the Lord set thee apart. . . .'

'Thy words, O king, are unintelligible to me. Can mercy stand beside justice? For the Law, the Law that I have been taught from childhood, teaches an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a head for a head; and one may not let the wrong go unpunished. And that is justice. When I rescued the prisoners taken by the Babylonian I sought out the overseer who had beaten my nephew, and shed his blood. I did rightly and justly, for that man had insulted my line in the person of my brother's son. The law says: If a murderer is found and killed by one who takes vengeance on behalf of his blood, he who kills shall be left without guilt. If I had stayed my

hand and had had compassion on that man's soul, would I not have been failing both the law and my own blood?"

"The time will come when this, too, thou wilt understand, Ab-Ram. Thou wilt understand that the merciful shall himself find mercy. Human mercy to his brother, and Divine mercy to all flesh. But meanwhile, thou shalt do justice according to thy measure. The measure is given to each of us by God, and according to it will He judge us."

They were both silent.

"How am I to satisfy the souls of my people?" Ab-Ram began again. "What sign shall I give them that they may believe?"

"That is difficult, that is difficult," the king-priest confirmed with a nod. "Neither graven, nor molten, nor moulded image canst thou give. Thou wouldst be like a man who drew up the water of the sea in a vessel, showed it to others, and said: "Behold the sea! Look, how great, how sounding, and billowing, and there is no end to it. . . ." And from the highest mountain he took a little stone, held it in his hand, and cried: "Behold the high mountain, reaching to heaven; its summit is crowned with snow, and no mortal can ascend its slopes." All representation is an insult to and diminution of the Lord, for the creature cannot comprehend the Creator. . . ."

"Their souls are hungry. If I do not feed the souls of my people, despite my will they will go and worship gods of clay. . . ."

"Permit me to ponder over what thou hast said."

The king wrapped himself more closely in his cloak, and was lost in thought. Ab-Ram did not dare to break in on those thoughts. Sitting motionless, he passed his eyes over the starry pattern of heaven and recalled all he had heard that night.

"They could be given a sign in their flesh that they belong to the Lord," Melchizedek said, while Ab-Ram listened intently. "Being in Egypt, thou must have heard of the rite called circumcision."

"I heard," the son of Terah agreed, astonished. "The Egyptians called us "amu", which is to be translated as "uncircumcised", or "unclean". One merchant told me they observed this custom for the sake of health and fertility."

"There are various reasons for it. Not only those of fertility and health. It could be a testimony of readiness to shed one's blood for the Lord. It could be a seal sealing the servant, and distinguishing him from those who know not God. A mark that, voluntarily accepted, cannot be erased,

causes the human soul to value the Lord. Since, for man, that alone has value which is costly to him.'

Observing Ab-Ram's astonishment, and his obvious repugnance to the idea of mutilating his own body, the king smiled and went on:

'Thou wilt see for thyself. Meanwhile, continue as before. I say only one thing: In all that thou doest, the Lord is with thee.'

Ab-Ram could contain himself no longer. He broke out:

'I am unworthy! Unworthy! The Lord is making a mock of His servant, and thou also art deriding me, Melchizedek. I am a simple man, a swarm of thoughts obscene and wicked. Why, make a spectacle of a simpleton? The Lord said: "Thy seed shall be as numerous as the stars in heaven and the sand on the seashore," but I in my oncoming age have only one son, and he is born of a concubine and bondwoman. The Lord said that the earth, all this very land, will be mine and my children's; but I do not desire more land than I need to graze my cattle and flocks, and the one well at which I can water my animals suffices me. Nothing more do I desire. What is all this land to me? And how could it be mine, when it belongs to others? For generations people have dwelt in it in their habitations, they have their gardens and vineyards. The Lord knows that I wish them no evil. Let them consume the fruits of their land in peace. So how can this land become mine? I am an ignorant and simple man, unlearned. Sometimes I think I have understood what Nergal-Sar said to me and what thou art saying to me now; but then your speech seems filled with mysterious meaning, which I cannot apprehend. And I would be glad to flee before my Lord and before you, sages whose words are intelligible, but not to me. Great is my stupidity. Dost thou regard me as wise, like thyself, Melchizedek? Why makest thou a laughing-stock of me? What have I done? The eagle carried a tortoise up into the air and cried: "Fly!" But when he released the tortoise from his talons the tortoise fell to the ground and was shattered against a rock. How had the tortoise offended? And how could he avoid being shattered?'

'All thou sayest is true, Ab-Ram, erring in only one thing, that the Lord will not release thee from His talons. . . .'

Deeply troubled, Ab-Ram wanted to go on objecting and complaining. But he suddenly remembered the words Nahor had sent him through Eliezer: that as an eagle spreads its wings over its chicks preparing for flight, so the God of Ab-Ram was over him, Ab-Ram. And in sudden alarm he was silent.

on a trunk, which they thought would transfer the spell from the beast to the tree.

Disturbed by the news that a sheep was sick, he shook off his drowsiness, adjusted the kerchief on his head and, picking up his staff, went to look at the flock. The three tents belonging to him personally stood under the trees on a rise; the rest of the camp was scattered in a half-circle below. A stream fed by a spring from the rise flowed down the middle of the valley. The source was so copious that even this year's heat had failed to dry it up.

As he passed through the camp he heard a woman crying in one of the tents, and halted.

'What is the matter, Sephah?' he asked.

A woman, still young, sobbing and trembling violently, fell at his feet, but made no answer.

'What is the matter?' Ab-Ram repeated in a kindly tone. 'Are your children ill?'

'No! No!' She energetically protested. 'My children are well.'

She broke into a still more doleful weeping. Realising that he would get no answer from her, Ab-Ram went on. He assumed that her husband had beaten her, or she had quarrelled with her neighbour.

He walked among the flocks and herds grazing in the valley. They were so numerous and so fine that he stopped, satisfiedly stroking his snow-white beard. His hair was just as white beneath his kerchief, for seven years had passed since his talk with king Melchizedek. The Hebrew camp was no longer pitched in its previous spot, beside the well which Nahor son of Sarug had dug, but close to Hebron, by the oak grove known as Mamre. In the former spot Jeser the Hivite had persistently made difficulties for Ab-Ram's people, reproaching them that they had come uninvited to graze their flocks and herds on grass that his own animals needed. Ab-Ram could not endure such reports. True, he could have gone to Abimelech, with whom he had once exchanged sandals, and obtained from him the right to shed the Hivite's blood, but he had preferred to follow a different course. Summoning Jeser to him, he had said:

'We will cast lots, as our fathers did of old. The lot shall decide who is to remain by the well, and who depart, lest there be quarrels between us.' Jeser had readily agreed, but Ab-Ram had added: 'If my God desires that the lot shall go against me, the well shall remain mine, even though I

graze my flocks and herds elsewhere. For nothing can alter the circumstance that my grandfather bored it in the rock.'

Jeser had answered; 'Let it be as you say, since I am not concerned for the name of this well, only that your herds cause a great press at the water, and bellow so loud that leopards come down from the hills, which never happened before.'

Gathering the smooth, round stones called 'Purim' in the edge of his cloak, Ab-Ram had gazed up to heaven and had prayed in spirit: 'Direct, O Lord, the hand of Thy servant, that I may go wherever Thou desirest me. . . .' Then he had cast lots. It had fallen to Ab-Ram to depart thence, Jeser, who had watched Ab-Ram praying, had thought that the god of Ab-Ram could not be of much worth, since he had not listened to his servant's entreaty. Any demon would have arranged the stones in his hand as required, for only a small offering.

After this Ab-Ram had moved northward, to the oak grove of Mamre, where the brothers Eshcol and Aner dwelt. There he had finally pitched his tents. The grass was plentiful, the spring was abundant in water, the air healthy, the soil fertile. Little by little the Hebrews began to organise their husbandry as they had done outside the city of Ur. They sowed wheat and planted vineyards. The black goatskin tents were filled once more with abundance. They praised the spot, thanking the gods that their leader was growing old and had lost all desire for further wandering.

Ishmael, Ab-Ram's son, was now in his tenth year. He was like his father in features, and was handsome, strong and agile. He was afraid of nothing; he baited the bulls with logs, he could hit small animals with arrows from his bow, he swarmed up the highest palms, and could imitate animals' calls excellently. He wandered off out of the camp for whole days, and the dogs, to whom he threw the birds he caught, followed him readily. When he wanted anything his large black eyes grew fixed and hard, like those of a bird of prey; he would not sleep or rest until he had gained his object. This caused much grief to Ab-Ram, who did not know how to train the boy. 'He is my only son,' he told himself with a feeling of affection when Ishmael was not in his vicinity; and then he mentally carried on friendly, wise conversations with the absent boy, and shared his soul's secrets with him. But as soon as Ishmael approached Ab-Ram grew cold, and, only too anxious for him to go away, agreed to everything he demanded. Ishmael irritated his father with every breath he took, as though his very presence were due to a misunderstanding, as

if he should have been not himself, but some other. . . . His father could see nothing of himself in this unruly youngster, and he felt that he was to blame. Truly, when he had gone to Hagar, stupefied by perfumes and desire, he had not thought of transmitting his own spirit to his son! He indulged Ishmael more than was advisable, ignoring Eliezer's muttered remark that he who spared the rod held his son in hatred.

Hagar still adored her only child blindly and injudiciously, but Ishmael treated her as a slave. She concealed all his misdoings from his father, or, if they came to light, pleaded for him not to be punished.

Lot, son of Haran, had not come to the camp as he had promised. Soon after Ab-Ram's return Hibal brought back the camel Ab-Ram had lent, his nephew, and announced that his master would remain in Sodom, while he, Hibal, was going to settle in one of the trans-Jordan cities. So saying, Hibal wept and upbraided Ab-Ram for not detaining the son of Haran by force, which he had had the right to do, since a released captive becomes the property of the liberator.

'How could I enslave a freeman?' Ab-Ram had asked.

'Surely you bind a madman to prevent his flying over the precipice?' Hibal had reminded him. To which Ab-Ram had sorrowfully answered that he had sworn that if the son of Haran did not return to the camp before the first new moon he, Ab-Ram, would count him as equal with the Sodomites in their loathsome abominations. 'The word once pronounced remains in force. No one can withdraw it. Now the son of Haran must do as he wishes. Every man makes his own couch and dreams the dreams he desires.'

A year after the memorable expedition against the Babylonian Eliezer had ridden again to Harran, carrying an abundance of gifts from all the tribe for the sons of Nahor. Ab-Ram had again given Eliezer much gold, and had ordered him to stop in Damascus on his way back. The old servant had remained there two months, had sought out his kinsmen and had returned doubly happy, first because he had been again in his native city, and then because he had returned. He had brought back valuable gifts from his travels: Damascene products, famous all over the world. He had given gifts to Sara, Noa, Ketura, Ishmael, and all except Ab-Ram, to whom he did not dare to give a gift, and to Hagar, for whom he had no liking.

The years which had sprinkled snow over Ab-Ram's head had left

their significant traces on Sarai's face. Gazing at her lined, leop features, one had difficulty in believing that she had ever been beautiful. Her step had grown burdensomely slow, as with old women. The difference in age between her and Noa was imperceptibly being erased. When they sat side by side spinning in the tent, they looked almost of the same age. Sarai's temper also suffered change. As she lost her feminine characteristics, the painful, piercing wound of sterility, which had afflicted her all her days began to heal. What would it have brought her at this time, even if she had given birth, when young, like any other woman? The children would have been reared and might well have gone far from her. The sons would be living in their own tents, the daughters would have been given to husbands from other tribes, and would not even see their mother. She, Sarai, would be as solitary as she was now. The strangers who sometimes visited the camp no longer stared at her in astonishment, looking in vain for the children at her side. Well, she had grown old, like other women. Her life had passed; for life always passes at the same speed, whether it be good or bad.

Long since, too, Sarai had lost all hope of winning Ishmael's goodwill. From his earliest years the boy had been unable to endure her. At first she had been sincerely upset by this, but as time passed she had grown indifferent. She was glad that the son born of her husband's seed was handsome and more clever than any other lad of his age in the camp; but she felt no tenderness for him. He was a living memento of the mistake which she still could not forgive herself for making.

Not had she forgotten her old grudge against Hagar. Though stilled, overlaid by the dust of time, the two women's mutual hatred persisted, glowing like embers covered with ash, ready to burst into flame at the least provocation.

So the days and years had flowed by, monotonous, as like to one another as the sunrises and sunsets. Ab-Ram had returned to his favourite occupation of sitting late in the evening outside his tent, gazing at the stars. Once he had dreamed that his son would sit beside him and ask questions, and he would answer; but Ishmael was interested only in the voices of birds and jackals, and that in order to hunt them. So Ab-Ram sat alone of an evening. Here the evenings were different from those on the Euphrates. Here there was no great river, down to which the herdmen drove the cattle and sheep; no forest of reeds, none of the hubbub and

chatter of waterfowl winging their way upward. In this rare mountain air the herds went down into the valley to drink from the stream, the eagles and vultures circled high overhead, hardly perceptible. In the oak grove lived audacious and dangerous boars which came out for food. Guards had to be posted regularly to protect the wheat from them, for they could destroy all the harvest in one night. Sometimes the roar of a lion was to be heard in the nearby hills, and then the herdsmen threw brushwood on to the camp fires, keeping them flaming all night. When darkness fell, these fires flickered ruddily, like vigilant eyes. Ab-Ram wrapped himself closely in his cloak against the cold, covered his feet with a sheepskin, and let his eyes wander over the sky, as though in expectation. Through all the past seven years the Lord had not spoken to him once. But Ab-Ram was not disturbed by this silence. It is not the servant's place to command the lord what he has to do, or to fear that the lord will neglect to finish what he has begun. It is the servant's part to have girded loins, and to wait for the least gesture.

The sheep were grazing quietly; not one of them showed any signs of sickness. Had it already got better, or had the shepherds been mistaken? This incident, of no significance in itself, made Ab-Ram wonder. It was not the first time he had been troubled by a feeling that in the tribe things were happening of which he had no knowledge, things which were carefully concealed from him. He did not know how long this had been going on. Accustomed to his people's obedience and confidence, he did not quickly notice that conversations carried on aloud tended to die away when he approached, and that when he asked someone a question he often received a vague answer, embarrassed glances; and that the crowded gatherings in the tent of Aser, Sephah's husband, broke up hurriedly when he came in. Unfinished sentences were left hanging in the air, and he was at a loss to know what it all meant.

A day or two after the incident with Aser and Mosa he noticed that in the oak grove a sapling had been cut down close to the ground, and the place where it grew had been well trodden. He did not like trees to be cut down without his knowledge, and he asked several men one after another what the sapling had been needed for. Each gave him a different answer. According to Yahiel, the tree had been used as a stake fixed in a pit dug out on the track taken by the boars. But Aser said he had taken it to give further support to his tent. Mosa had used it to strengthen the thorn

barriers set up at the valley outlet, as protection against the lions. Undoubtedly they were all lying. Ab-Ram asked Eliezer what he thought of it.

The old servant seemed to be expecting this question.

'Evil things are occurring among your people, my lord. Every man has two faces, every man has two tongues. The proverb says: "double measure and double weight are equally abominable."'

'Tell all you know!' Ab-Ram interrupted roughly.

'I know nothing, my lord. I smell the smoke, I do not see the fire. Where there are reeds there is water, they say. I hear the rustle of the reeds, but I do not see the water. The people avoid me, for they know that the soul of your servant has no secrets from your soul. . . .'

'Tell me what you conjecture. . . .'

'You will not build a wall on conjectures. What have you gained if I tell you my conjectures, my lord? Your servant judges that the hidden firebrand is to be found in the tent of Aser.'

'Certainly I have noticed that the herdmen gather there often. . . .'

'And I no longer see the son of Aser, little Zabpai. . . . That is all your servant has noticed.'

Without a word, Ab-Ram rose and went to Aser's tent. Though he was white-haired, he retained the stately carriage and easy movements associated with long-lived families. As he stood at the entrance to the tent he seemed gigantic and threatening to Sephah, and she fell on her face before him.

'Where is Zabpai, your son and Aser's, woman?'

She burst into tears, and glanced fearfully across her shoulder into a corner of the tent which was hung with a linen curtain.

'He is not here, my lord,' she stammered. 'He has gone.'

'Where has he gone to? Can he walk so well by himself already? Call your son.'

Without raising her head, she sobbed:

'He is not . . . he is not. . . .'

She glanced behind her again. Ab-Ram strode in the direction of her gaze, and tore away the curtain, to reveal a small stone altar, with two wooden, clumsily-carved teraphim standing on it. The wood of which they were carved was fresh, and bore a brownish red stain, as though they had been soaked in blood. He understood.

Without saying a word, he picked up both the images and went out.

Aser's wife remained kneeling, weeping, and repeating: 'He is not . . . he is not. . . .'

'Summon all the men of the tribe,' Ab-Ram said to Eliezer. 'Let them stand before my tent immediately they have watered the cattle. I adjure them in the Name of the Lord Most High that not one of them absent himself.'

So ordering, he shut himself away in his tent. Despite his outward sign of calm, he was torn by a terrible anger. So that was it! They had dared to sacrifice a child to a tree, and to carve teraphim! Here, in his tribe where the One True God reigned. He decided that he would punish the guilty ones harshly, very harshly. And again he asked himself in amazement: did he still rule the tribe, when he had known nothing at all of this that was happening? His authority over the people had slipped from his hands, but he did not know when. And who was to blame?

When evening came on, the cattle had been watered, the camp fire began to flame, and the sky, as usual, was lit up with the soundless laughter of distant lightnings, all the men of the tribe assembled, in accordance with the command. They already knew what had occurred, and their faces reflected their deep anxiety. The chief was sitting before his tent. His face was clouded, and the wooden teraphim lay beneath his feet; the soles of his feet rested on them.

When they were all seated round him, wrapped in their cloaks, Ab-Ram rose and, without speaking, flung the two images into the fire blazing in front of him. The damp oak began to hiss and to scatter sparks. The assembled men fidgeted restlessly, one or two of them rose to their feet, as though about to run and rescue the images from the flames. But no one dared. They gazed at the fire in despair. Others breathed heavily, and sighed. Their faces, customarily expressive of a vegetative tranquillity or animal cunning, revealed their unhappiness.

Pointing with one finger at the smoking images, Ab-Ram asked:

'Who made them without my knowledge and permission?'

'I did,' Aser boldly answered, rising to his feet. 'Sur told us that Terah son of Nahor had made similar images. I do not think I did evil in doing that which your father, Ab-Ram, did all through his life.'

Ab-Ram all but cried out: 'Terah son of Nahor did not believe in the gods he carved. But he was afraid of the priests, so he held his peace and went on carving them. He would never have sacrificed his child to them.' But it seemed unfitting for him to reveal his own father's weakness. And

he was astonished at Aser's bearing. The shepherd did not seem to regard himself as guilty of any offence. Pasting his eyes over the assembly, Ab-Ram asked the herdman:

'Do you speak for yourself, or in the name of all?'

Before Aser could reply, shouts arose from all the ring: 'Aser speaks truly. He speaks for us all.'

Ab-Ram had always thought of his fellow tribesmen as submissive children, whom he could direct as he wished. But now before him were new, strange people.

'Terah son of Nahor, my honoured father,' he explained, 'did not know the True God, the Lord Most High. So he made images of Marduk or the goddess Damkina. I know the Lord Most High, and you know Him me.'

They interrupted him, almost shouting:

'We do not know him. We do not even know his name. It is you who know him. . . . We know nothing about him. You have said that he has neither body nor features. How do you know he exists?'

'Silence! Let one speak!'

The shouts died away, the men jostled one another with their elbows and thrust Aser forward. But Aser in turn pushed at Yahiel, who had Ab-Ram's trust. At first Yahiel refused to speak, but at last he began to talk slowly, circumspectly:

'We have made teraphim. What evil is there in carving teraphim? You have wronged us, Ab-Ram, by throwing them into the fire. There was a child's blood on them. Every tribe has teraphim, only you, Ab-Ram, left your teraphim behind in Harran, where they bestow their blessing on Nahor son of Terah. We knew nothing of that and we were of quiet mind, thinking the teraphim were in your tent, as is fitting. But years ago Eliezer the Damascene, returning from Harran, said that our teraphim were standing in the courtyard of your brother. From that time we have known neither quiet nights nor quiet days. We said nothing to you, knowing that your god is a jealous god and will not endure other gods beside him. But Aser sacrificed his son in order to sanctify the wood from which he carved the teraphim: What evil did he do? Sacrifice is acceptable to the gods. We cannot live any longer without gods, Ab-Ram. In the city of Ur there was Nannai-Sin, a strong and friendly god, whom our fathers glorified. Then the Babylonian Marduk came, and he also reigned over the people. He had temples, altars, priests, and servants. Later, in

Harra we saw the old god Nannar-Sin reigning as in the past and we rejoiced, for he was the god of our fathers. In Canaan we saw very cruel and vengeful gods, and in Egypt gods with the heads of different animals, and among them unclean animals. . . . Everywhere the people have gods and priests and altars, we alone have no one. We have been left without care. At night we are afraid the demons will come and carry us off, or our children, and we have no defence against them. We know that you have your god, Ab-Ram. We think he has forbidden you to reveal his name to us. Is he then a magician whose name cannot be mentioned, because if it is named he loses his power? Even so your god is not very powerful, for Jeser the Hivite told us that you asked your god for the lot to fall in your favour, but he failed to do it. And we have seen the altar to your god in Uru-Salem; we felt ashamed as we remembered the Chaldean and Babylonian temples, which are filled with gold. We do not want to live any longer without gods, Ab-Ram. Why did you burn our teraphim? What harm have they done you? We were never asked before what gods we believe in, whether Marduk or Nannar-Sin. Now allow us to believe in our own fashion. Aser sacrificed his little son in order to give the teraphim strength and to win the friendship of the gods. Why did you burn the teraphim?

He stopped, and gave his chief a look of deep affliction.

'Have you ended?' Ab-Ram asked.

Yahiel nodded and sat down, to gaze into the fire, where the wooden images were crackling and smoking.

'Then hearken to my words, Hebrews. Harken diligently to my words. Yahiel has said that Aser sacrificed his little son so that the child's blood should give power to the gods you have made, and to win their friendship. Then why, when I threw them into the fire and when I trod them with my foot, why did the gods not speak? Why did your teraphim not resist the consuming fire? Aser went to the wood and chose a log, he shed his child's blood over it, he cut it down with his axe, he carved it into human shape and then fell on his knees before it; and he said to you: "Behold your god! Kneel before him, calling: 'Save us!'" Who caused it to have the power to harm or help? Was it the child, who was not yet fully grown in his own strength? What did you do with the rest of the log? Of a certainty some of it went to make stakes for fences or was chopped up for firewood, or you made stools of it. A god and a footstool from the one stump? Who told you, and marked on the bark: "from

here to here this log is sacred, but here it is ordinary wood. Perhaps you were mistaken? Perhaps the footstool is the god, or the stake in the fence? Well then! Go and kneel to it!

'Do not make a mock of us, Ab-Rim,' Yahiti said moodily, 'for we are simple people and you will not find wisdom among us. We have done as our fathers did before us. Since when has the custom of our fathers become evil and stupid?'

'I will not scoff at you further. You have seen with your own eyes that the teraphim were unable to defend themselves; but of a truth, he who has blasphemed against the Lord Most High shall die the death, for earth and air, fire and water all serve Him. You think He would lose His power if we named Him by name, as if He were a magician hiding like a toad among the stones; but I say unto you that if the Name of the Lord were to be uttered by man all the earth would be riven asunder. For by that Name the worlds arise and fall; the stars are lit and extinguished. He needs no temples or ornaments, for the dawn is His wings, and the sun is the gold of His altars. You do not see Him, yet all that goes on in the world is testimony to His existence. If you do not want to open your own eyes, believe me, your chief. When have I ever lied to you? When have I ever deceived you? I am ready at any moment to die in testimony that God is. You complain that you are without protection? It will soon be twelve years since I first began to live, I and all the tribe, under the protection of the True God. Who has suffered any wrong? Whose child has been borne off by demons? No other tribe has been so well protected and spared as you have. Does anything evil come upon you? Have you ever been hungry? Has our camp ever been visited by locusts, disease, or enemies? The Lord Most High, the One Lord has extended His care over you like a tent, and that does not suffice you! Stupid were the words of Jeser the Hivite, for I did not pray that the lot should fall in my favour, only that the Lord should lead me whither He wished. In no other way could I pray to the Lord. For He knows what the morrow will bring, but I do not. He knows what is good and necessary for man, but I might ask for a fruit in which a serpent lurks. It is my honour, my joy, that I am subject to the Lord as the earth is subject to the plough, as the woman to the man, as the child to its father. . . . He is the Lord, I am the servant. His will is my will. What more do you wish to hear from me?'

'I have heard enough,' Eliezer, who was sitting on one side, said hurriedly. 'I have faith in my lord; his god is my God.'

'It seems I have found greater faith in a servant born in a foreign land than among my own people. What is in your minds? Speak!'

The assembly was silent; the men hung their heads. They were still unconvinced. At last Yahiel spoke mournfully:

'Fine and learned is your speech, Ab-Ram son of Terah, but we have never seen your god. We are not accustomed to believing without seeing. Remove your anger from us and tell your god to give us a sign, that we may believe. We will praise and glorify your god, but let him give us a sign.'

2

The Covenant

AB-RAM DID NOT SLEEP ALL THAT NIGHT. HE FELT TROUBLED TO THE depths of his soul; he was profoundly anxious, overwhelmed with grief. Grief for himself, or for his tribe? He did not know. One moment he was angry with his fellow tribesmen for demanding a sign from God; the next he reminded himself that at one time he had been like them. They wanted a sign. Only the Lord could give them that. Would He not be angry at such a request? What sign would completely convince them? For the hundredth time he regretted that the Lord had called him, an unlearned man, to His service, instead of Nergal-Sar, or Melchizedek. They would both have known what to do. But Nergal-Sar had departed almost unknown, and Melchizedek also had died some years since. Both these guides and masters had vanished, as though removed by the Lord's hand so that he, Ab-Ram, should carve his own way. Now, like a hungry man seeking scraps of bread in the larder, he recalled all the details of his conversation with Melchizedek concerning people who thirsted for a visible sign. The priest-king had not been indignant, as Ab-Ram was; he had admitted that this demand was proper to human beings. He had mentioned the Egyptian rite of circumcision as a sign and seal that might satisfy the human desire for something visibly testifying that they belonged to God. At that time Ab-Ram had rejected the idea out of hand. But now his anger and grief for his fellow-tribesmen drove him to consider the question in a different light. They wanted a sign: let them have it! A painful, hard, and ineradicable sign! Let them suffer! He writhed inwardly at the thought that he would have to begin with himself. He rejected the idea, and sought further. But the conversation with the royal sage, on the rooftop in that stone city, obstinately returned to his memory. 'Do according to your measure,' Melchizedek had said. The people needed to be given a sign according to their measure. No one dressed a child in the

robes of a grown man, for in them it would get entangled, and would perish. Would not that sign be fitted to his people's childish minds? Melchizedek had said that the seal of circumcision testified that the one so sealed was ready to shed his blood for his Lord. Not as men offer children to the gods, but sacrificing his own true body, his own blood, his own pain. This gift could be made to the Lord and be accepted as an acceptable sacrifice. Now Ab-Ram wiped out of his mind the anger he had felt for his tribe since his discovery of the teraphim, and lost the loathing with which he had regarded the idea of circumcision. In fact, he was coming to think that the greater the loathing and fear, the more valuable the offering. Had he not again and again regretted in his soul that, blessed as he was by the Lord, he had nothing with which he could show his gratitude?

These thoughts began to possess him so completely that he looked impatiently for the dawn. The answer for which the people were waiting, and even his own hesitations, were overshadowed by the realisation that he could show the Lord his own gratitude and devotion. It was part of his nature to act at once on every decision he made, and so, shutting himself away in his tent, he set to work. He mutilated himself painfully and clumsily, he could hardly restrain a groan; but he achieved his purpose. Weak, and sick, he lay down on the couch. Despite the almost unbearable pain he had a feeling of satisfaction. Now he had truly offered the Lord his own blood, not that of heifers, bulls, or sheep. He lay quietly all that day, defending himself as well as he could from the anxious women, who were alarmed by his sudden illness. He refused food, though they brought him the tastiest of morsels; but he greedily drank water, and demanded only to be left in peace. In the evening he grew feverish. Half asleep, he was visited by visions. The tent seemed to be an ark borne on the waters and falling downward with the waves. In his half-conscious meditations, groaning with pain every time he moved, Ab-Ram felt ashamed of the anger he had displayed towards his own tribe only yesterday. The Hebrew shepherds were only a small part of the great human throng which was crying out for God, and thundering the questions: 'Whither go we? What to? Whose are we?' But Ab-Ram, who by the special dispensation of God had come to know the truth, and could have given an answer to this question, had been silent for years, making no attempt to share with others the treasure he possessed.

'But how can I speak?' he asked himself anxiously. He recalled the

knowledge and wisdom of the priests, unequalled in all the world; their knowledge of the secrets of the stars and the earth, the several stages of the temple at Ur, each filled with tablets containing all manner of sciences and knowledge. Against that power, which even kings did not dare to affront, was he, a simple, illiterate man, skilled only in the rearing of cattle and sheep, to set himself? The comparison seemed amusing, and he could not help thinking of himself as ludicrous. And he was so dismayed that he again lost strength. But once more, as soon as he closed his eyes, through his feverish brain popped waves which were not the waves of the sea but the generations of the sons of earth, seeking God.

He reached out for a cup of water tinged with wine, which Sarai had set by his head, and the visions vanished. He grew sober. What was it he was thinking of attempting to achieve? Alas! You are driving your flocks to a too distant pasturage, shepherd! You think to measure yourself with kings, to quarrel with the priests of Marduk; and so far you have not subjected even your own tribe to the Lord! You will do much, and very much, if you convince your own people. Think only of them. Give them a sign—the same sign which you have carved in your own body. From your own tribe you will create a fortress and sanctuary of the Lord.

The entrance flap was lifted. Eliezer slipped in quietly, and stared at the sick man with eyes expressive of his anxiety. He was surprised and delighted when his master gave him a friendly, though miserable smile.

'It is good that you have come, Eliezer,' Ab-Ram whispered, painfully moistening his parched lips with his tongue. 'Tell the men of the tribe that in a day or two, when I am well again, in the name of the Lord Most High I will give them the sign which they have demanded. Let them wait in peace, untroubled. Bring me some water. . . .'

'Live for ever, my lord! I have brought water. The people will rejoice when I tell them what you have said. They were smitten with fear that your god had struck you down, in anger at what they had done.'

When the servant had departed, the sick man renewed the broken thread of his meditations. Henceforth his tribe would have no other god and no other faith than that of the Lord Most High. To him, Ab-Ram, it fell to be chief and priest in one, as Melchizedek had been to his people. And one who takes on priesthood must change his name, renouncing his ancestral origin. Of the generations of man one said: 'the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, the son of Haran.' With the priests it was not so. The father of the priest was the god whose name was included in his new

name. *Sep-Sin . . . Awen-El . . . Nergal-Sar . . .* And so hē, Ab-Ram, should do; but the Lord had not revealed His Name to His servant. The unutterable Name of the Lord was not to be given shape in the mouth of a mortal. As he considered this problem, the name which Melchizedek had persistently repeated years before suggested itself: 'Ab-Raham'. And now the name which had once terrified him seemed to have some connection with the innumerable generations of people who were passing in a feverish vision before his eyes. He decided to adopt the name of Ab-Raham.

But was he alone to change his name? In taking on the priestly office, would he not draw his wife after him? He felt strongly impelled to do something in recognition of his faithful comrade, Sarai. Nor, indeed, only for her. The words Lot had said when he and Ab-Raham had been riding on the one camel came vividly to his mind. O, memory, infallible steward! Like a miser you seize on everything, even things seemingly of no import; you conceal them in your secret places, to bring them out at the suitable moment and to set them before the eyes. When Lot had remarked that the law underestimated women, Ab-Ram had not thought much of the words, he had dismissed them with silence. But now they seemed to him so just, so valuable, that he thirsted not only to distinguish his wife, but in his wife to honour Woman.

Night came on, and with it the fever returned. The pictures were again confused, they erased the bond between dream and reality. Now he seemed audacious, mad, arrogant in his own eyes. His mind swarmed with great intentions, he had decided to be the priest of the tribe; he wanted to change his own name and Sarai's; but what certainty had he that the Lord required all this? Hitherto he had only listened and waited. The Lord had spoken to him when it was His will to speak. But now the servant wanted to compel the Creator.

And, humbled, afflicted, Ab-Ram also, like the shepherds whom he had recently despised for this same weakness, began to implore the Lord for a sign.

'Many years have passed since Thou last spakest to me,' he said. 'That does not disturb me, for thou art Eternal, and a thousand ages in Thy sight are like an evening gone. It is not for me, but for my tribe that I am anxious. So work, that they may know Thy glory. Make a covenant with me and with all the tribe, that they may descry Thee whom they see not and may know Thee whom they know not. I put my trust in Thee. So

work, that others also may trust in Thee. Without Thee there is neither light nor peace. Be our Goel, our King and Guardian. We will be Thy servants. I have never asked thee anything before, O Lord. . . . Now I will ask, and will not cease asking. . . . Thou knowest the hearts of men, and knowest that I do not ask for myself, since nothing will diminish my faith. But my people want a sign. Give them a sign!

The pulse in his temples drummed like a hammer, the pain from his self-inflicted wound pierced through his body, the tent, like an ark, rose, floated, swayed. . . . Ab-Ram had the feeling that, just as once he had been caught up in the air, so again he could see himself below himself; and he thought he heard a voice:

'I will make a covenant with thee and thy people. . . .'

Then everything was confused, was mingled into a single roar that engulfed his memory, his consciousness, his thought.

Only on the fourth day did Ab-Ram emerge from his tent, well, though still weak. He at once summoned the men of the tribe and declared to them:

'The Lord Most High, the True God, has promised to make a covenant with the tribe of Hebrews. Before He does so they must openly renounce all other gods, and must throw all tablets and amulets into the fire, if any possess them, since the Lord will not come where another reigns.'

They listened in gloomy silence, taken aback, for they had not anticipated that they would have to renounce the old gods. Of their own choice they had been taken in the snare. If they refused, they would affront the god of Ab-Ram; but if they obeyed they would draw down upon themselves the anger of vengeful demons. Woe! Woe!

Inexorable, stern, Ab-Ram stood in the centre of the ring, naming one after another all the gods known to the tribe. He asked whether they rejected them in their own name, and in that of their descendants. They assented with trembling, looking about them fearfully. They renounced the god Ea, the god En-Lil, the god Anu, the god Ennu, the favourite god of their fathers, Nannar-Sin, the goddess Damkina, the goddess Ishtar, the goddess Zirbanit. They renounced the spirits called Anunnaki, Ekimmu, Utukki, and many others. They renounced the demons of the air, the earth, and the water. They renounced the evil Labartu, Ilu, Galu, and Rabisu. As with trembling they pronounced the words of apostasy, they stealthily thrust into the fire their amulets bearing the image of the

demon named. Things that hitherto had been as a saving snare, now, after the renunciation, would become a menacing weapon of the affronted spirit. They spoke and acted hurriedly, hoping that the demon would not notice their words and actions in the general confusion.

When all the men had sworn that they would have no other gods but the god of Ab-Ram, when the tablets, images and amulets were cracking and turning to ash in the fire, Ab-Ram began to make preparations to conclude the covenant with the Lord. In his simplicity he behaved as ancient custom directed. So from the flocks and herds he chose a heifer, a goat, and a ram, all without spot or blemish; and he also took a turtle-dove and a young pigeon. After slaughtering the animals he divided them through the middle, not removing their skins or their hooves, but he did not divide the birds. In the centre of the valley he cleared a narrow track of grass some ten paces long, and no wider than one pace, and he set the divided bodies of the animals on either side of the track, each half against its other half, so that if put together they would be as though whole. He did not divide the birds, but set them one on each side of the track, their beaks towards each other. In this labour he was assisted by Eliezer, Sur, Yahiel, Mosa, Aser and several others. The rest of the men surrounded them in a ring, watching the preparations anxiously. They knew that He whose Name might not be pronounced or even known would reveal Himself to their eyes and, in accordance with custom, would pass between the divided carcasses. His steps would be followed by Ab-Ram in the name of the tribe, and thenceforth nothing could violate the covenant thus concluded. The God of Ab-Ram and the Hebrew tribe would become one, just as the halves of the heifer, goat and sheep had been one. One blood in their veins, one heart, lungs, kidneys, liver. No one had ever heard of any of the gods concluding such a covenant with a man before, so the Hebrews rejoiced, even though they were also terribly afraid.

The preparations occupied all the morning till noonday. And the day was burning hot, windless. The path of the Covenant had been made in the middle of the valley, for all to see, far from the shade of the oak grove, and the people sitting about it and waiting for the Coming of the Lord were faint with the heat. Only Ishmael shouted merrily, amused by the whole affair, and Sur had difficulty in restraining the lad from running along the sacred path between the divided animals. Though still very weak, Ab-Ram took a branch and drove off the flies gathering about the

carcasses. Seeing this, Eliezer took the second branch, and the two men silently beat on each side. The dead animals had to be defended from more than flies. The scent of meat attracted the vultures, and they began to circle high above in the sky, gradually dropping lower and lower. Ishmael asked for permission to shoot at them with his bow, and sent arrows flying through the air; Aser and Sur picked up spears and drove off the more persistent of the birds. The time passed slowly, it almost seemed to stand still; the sun roasted them with fire; but no one came. The women brought their men food in platters. They ate but little, drank their fill of water, and again waited. Leaning heavily on his stick, Ab-Ram gazed up at the sky grey with heat; he gazed eastward to the mountains beyond which was the city of Uru-Salem; westward, to where the Great Sea roared; southward to the land of Negeb, dry and burnt; northward to where the city of Harran stood below the snow-covered mountains. He did not know from which direction the Lord would come; his limbs ached intolerably, his head swam with weariness. He swayed on his feet, but he would not sit down. The Lord might come unexpectedly, and he wanted to be ready. Worse than all the weariness and the heat was the fear that the Lord might not come at all. That he had been offended by the impertinent request. Even as Ab-Ram's own people had been astonished, and with reason, for covenants were concluded only between equal and equal, king and king, warrior and warrior, shepherd and shepherd, never between god and man. What frenzy had taken possession of him when he had made such a demand?

The heat streaming from the heavens did not lessen, the air was still sultry. From time to time a sudden afternoon breeze sprang up, sent columns of dust whirling, then dropped again, intensifying the sultriness and bringing no refreshment. The carcasses of the heifer, goat, and sheep began to swell and turn black with the heat. Exhausted by the waiting, the people relieved one another at their posts; some went away, others kept watch. Only Ab-Ram endured the vigil, standing and turning his head in all directions like a crane. He felt an unbearable pressure on his heart. His reason cried: 'No one will come. Deceive not yourself and others.' An unknown, secret voice replied: 'Have confidence! No one will come if you doubt. With your faith you will compel the Lord.' So he strengthened himself in the faith that was departing from him. Realising that the weariness of his will would overcome his desire, he yielded himself entirely into the hand of the Lord. He ceased to think of what the

disappointed people would say. Calm, still, empty of all impatience, he stood in perfect obedience.

But now dusk crept over the sky. Now the sky began to be lit up by lightnings closer than those of the everyday. Alarmed by the oncoming evening, the vultures flew off; the buzzing of the flies died away. Eliezer thrust his unnecessary spear into the ground. Parts of the carcasses had a bluish hue; the jackals began to steal out of the undergrowth. Even the men who had been keeping watch dozed off; only Ab-Ram kept guard. He watched, resting on his staff.

He watched, resting on his staff, even when a thunder-clap broke so overwhelming and close that the earth trembled, and the sleepers started to their feet. They stood for a moment, then fell to the ground again, stricken with dread. For with their own eyes they saw a great and glowing, fiery ball fall from the sky; amid a deafening thunder it rested momentarily on the point of Eliezer's spear, then fell still lower and rolled between the divided animals. Passing a little beyond them, it disappeared.

The roar of thunder was still rumbling about the earth, shaking the trees, terrifying the hearts smitten with dismay. Only Ab-Ram had no fear. As though in a dream he followed in the track of the flaming ball, strode along the path, smelling the scent of scorched hair. His heart was beating like a hammer. The Lord had come down. He had not abandoned His servant. He had made an everlasting covenant with the tribe of Hebrews.

The others were still lying face downward on the ground, not daring to raise their heads. Forgetting his weariness, the chief called on them to rise. They had seen the Lord pass, dread and terrible. Henceforth they were confederates of God himself. The Lord would keep faith with them, if they kept faith with Him. So long as they did not violate the covenant not one hair would fall from their heads. And now they would receive a token, the seal that they belonged to the Lord, and that no one but God had any right to them. By the light of a torch he laid himself bare before them, and showed them what the sign would be. They listened in amazement, yet ready to obey, assenting to all. The God of Ab-Ram had proved himself a mighty God. Their knees were still trembling with the terror they had experienced. It would be good to be under such protection. If the token which Ab-Ram demanded of them secured them against demons, it was worth a little pain.

Then their chief announced his own change of name. They accepted even this incomprehensible news more easily than they would have done at normal times, when their tongues wagged swiftly and their brains worked clearly. On such a day as today they would not have been astonished to see Ab-Ram rising in the air, or taking fire into his hands. The heaven and the earth were filled with mysteries and menaces, and they were as helpless as lost children.

So they accepted without protest the command to call their chief henceforth not Ab-Ram, nor Ab-Ram son of Terah, but Ab-Raham. Ab-Ram son of Terah, their chief, their goel, their judge, whom they had known as long as they could remember, had vanished without trace. Instead there was Ab-Raham, the servant and priest of the Lord Most High. His wife also was to receive a new name. Instead of Sarai, henceforth she was to be called Sarah, which means 'princess', 'eminent', 'lady'.

Next morning Ab-Ram began the circumcision of all the men of the tribe, from the oldest to the little children. He summoned them in turn, by name, according to their age and rank. Those who were first called suffered no little from the operation. But, as their chief grew more practised, those who came later suffered much less. They all bore the suffering with dignity, regarding the mark as an honourable distinction and guarantee of divine protection in the future.

Ab-Raham felt very happy. As he shed the freely given blood of his tribal brothers—the blood which is the essence of life, is life itself, is the sacred possession of God—he was sanctifying them to the Lord, he was confirming the Covenant made between him and God. The joy of that day was marred for him only by Ishmael, who was unwilling to submit to the rite. Unmoved by the example of his youthful companions in the camp, who obediently though anxiously waited at their fathers' sides, he fled and hid in the bushes. When at last he was tracked down he struggled and tore himself away, and bit the hands of Sur and Eliezer, who were taking him back. When reduced to helplessness he screamed vociferously. He had to be held still by four men. The sweat beaded Ab-Raham's face, his hands trembled. In his anxiety to spare his only son he added to the boy's pain. Hagar ran like a mad woman round the tent in which the token of the Covenant was being made in the flesh; she cursed Ab-Raham and all his designs, she howled like a wild beast. When the bawling lad was released he took refuge in his mother's arms, and their mingled weeping and their upbraidings of his father were heard for a long time.

after. The men gathering for the feast behaved as though they had not noticed anything of all this, in order not to bring shame on Ab-Raham, who was already deeply afflicted by his son's conduct.

Meanwhile the women prepared a banquet. Ab-Raham ordered that wine was to be issued abundantly, and as much olive oil as was desired, to anoint the wounds. Myrrh was added to the wine, for it had the property of drugging pain. But the majority of the revellers preferred to drink the wine without the addition of the bitter herb. Some of them had had to endure much more pain when a leopard had torn their shoulder or they had been kicked and trampled by a stampeding herd.

His trouble with Ishmael forgotten, Ab-Raham sat intent and cheerful among the banqueters. Let the armed potentates raise gilded temples to their gods in Babylon, Nineveh, and Egypt. Some new conqueror would destroy them or set new gods up in them. The One God, the True God, the Creator of heaven and earth had founded His indestructible habitation here, in Ab-Raham's people.

He looked back over the past days, the road traversed since that morning when some unknown power had lifted him into the air. Suddenly dazzled with light, he realised that all that had happened during these past years had been significant, had led to the end planned by God. Even his own weaknesses and faults and aimless wanderings and apparent immobility. Every day had brought nearer the time of maturity, thoughts had bored their way into his mind like beetles into a tree. And he realised that all the people he had met in the course of his life had helped in this task: both Nergal-Sar, who had been the first to point to the anticipated Truth, and the Babylonian Hammurabi, who had played such a large part with his attempt to enyoke the Hebrew tribe; both Sep-Sin, who had been afraid of the burden of the Truth, but who when the Lord had seized hold of him had valiantly given his life for it, and the well-remembered priest and king, Melchizedek, to whom Ab-Raham really owed this day. All of them - friends, kinsmen, enemies, even people with whom he had only momentary acquaintance. Knowingly or not, they had all brought a handful of clay to the edifice planned. His own fellow tribesmen, whom he had regarded as unwise children, had been of great assistance. They had forced him to act, had violated his will, by demanding that he should show them the Lord. Of a truth, without them he would have gone on quietly dozing, forgetting his unfulfilled obligation.

Bela, Mosa's wife, lamented over her husband's pain, but the shepherd laughed merrily. The wine he had drunk made him expansive, and so he told her the reason for his satisfaction.

'I have kept an amulet with an image of the demon of fire *Girru*. Ab-Ram son of Terah, whom we now call Ab-Raham, evidently forgot and did not mention that demon at all. I swiftly slipped the amulet into my bosom, and here it is!'

Mosa fell asleep happy, for it is pleasant to feel secured on all sides.

3

The Visitation

IN VERY DEED, THAT SUMMER WAS NOT LIKE OTHER SUMMERS. ALL MEN living had known storms, and burning winds that brought crimson mists from the wilderness; but now unprecedented things were happening. There were times when the earth trembled underfoot. One day a great cedar growing on a hill close to Hebron fell headlong, torn up by the roots, though there was no wind at all: Merchants coming from the Valley of Siddim told how the heavy, sluggish water of the Salt Lake billowed even when there was no wind, as though it were boiling within its depths. The inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah were said to have streamed out in great crowds to the bank of the lake to watch this phenomenon. The priests considered that it was caused by the anger of the gods, and they had made abundant sacrifices on the bank, of children, slaves, and cattle. These helped only for a brief while; in a few days the water was stirring again. Evidently demons were fighting one another at the bottom.

These reports filled all the land with disquiet. It was said that they presaged war, or famine. Only under the oak-grove of Mamre, where the Hebrew camp was pitched, did the alarming stories arouse no echo. For they did not even reach the camp.

As he stood one morning outside his tent, gazing along the valley, Ab-Raham's soul was filled with happiness. He saw the valley, green, despite the drought; he saw the sheep, emerging white against the opposite slope, and the stream flowing through the midst of the meadowland, glittering like a streak of molten silver beneath the sun. Over his head an oak stretched its twisted boughs, before him the sunlight filtering through the leaves cast little twinkling ripples. The world seemed so beautiful to him that he sat down to admire. As he sat, filled with delight and stillness as a bee is filled with honey, he thought he saw three human figures

descending the opposite hill. They seemed gigantic, as though they were of the sons of Anak, who once had inhabited this land. In the early morning sunlight they showed up brilliantly. Some incomprehensible feeling commanded Ab-Raham to rise and go to meet them as they approached. He walked faster and faster, as a son in his yearning runs to meet his father; though Ab-Raham did not know who these three were. He did not even know whether there were three men coming, or one; for the dazzling light disturbed his vision. Despite his haste, he looked about him again and again, amazed at the beauty of the world. That beauty seemed to be gathering, to be flooding everything with an astonishing light and colour. As he took delighted glances about him, he recalled that once before he had seen an equally magical world, a world of untroubled beauty, security, joy, freedom, peace, and order. Ah, but that had been in a vision, an all too brief vision. As he had looked about him then he had wept in anticipation of the transiency of that picture. Today it seemed to him that the vision had been realised, had descended to earth in order to endure.

Abruptly these thoughts and observations were dismissed from his mind, for all his attention was caught by the approaching figures. They were coming as giants, and shining with an inward light; as he went towards them he fell on his face to the ground, not daring to raise his eyes. He felt no fear, only a disabling joy. They were coming right up to him. He heard the shuffle of their sandals; the shadow of their forms fell across him. He raised his head, and was amazed.

The three Men of Light had vanished. In their place were three dusty travellers. The middle one was a grey-haired, bent old man, an old acquaintance of Ab-Raham's from the city of Uruk: Faleh son of Elas; he was standing between two well-grown young men. By their striking similarity to each other Ab-Raham guessed that they were Faleh's sons, the twins he had once seen in Ur. Of a truth, unexpected guests. But where had vanished those Others, those radiant and gigantic Ones?

Ab-Raham's face expressed such great astonishment that Faleh son of Elas began to laugh.

'Greetings, Ab-Ram son of Terah,' he said. 'My soul could not endure that I should pass so close to a friend's habitation without turning aside to visit him. I am journeying from Damascus, accompanying my sons, whom the priests of Ur have sent into these parts. . . .'

'Thou art the Lord!' Ab-Raham exclaimed in an exalted tone, breaking

into his fellow-countryman's speech. For he had again ~~descried~~ Those Three (or was it That One: he still did not know). They were (or He was) standing right behind Faleh, or perhaps it was above Faleh; they penetrated him, blended into one with him, and then were again to be distinguished from him, shining behind the traveller as a sun shines behind a hill.

'My Lord!' Ab-Raham said fervently, 'Deign to visit the tent of Thy servant.'

'We are coming to visit you, Ab-Ram son of Terah,' Faleh answered in some astonishment. He glanced behind him, feeling that Ab-Raham was gazing at someone standing there. But he saw nobody. Ab-Raham went in front of his guests, his face turned towards them. And the world grew more and more beautiful. Gazing at this beauty of the earth, he thought that the glory which filled it was coming from those shining Features; the shifting shadows of the grass were the edge of a robe embroidered with twinkling sunny circles. The Clarity of the Presence fell over the fleece of a lamb standing on the path, whitening it till it was whiter than snow. Tears of rapture sprang to his eyes, of rapture and simultaneously of sorrow. Amid the universal joy, why could he not discern his Lord? Was the Lord concealing Himself from His longing servant? Ab-Raham thought he caught the answer in his soul: 'Thou shalt see me, Ab-Raham, when the hour is come. Does that suffice thee?' 'It suffices me, my Lord; it suffices me.'

Once more they went amid a flood of glory. All creation was conscious of the Presence treading the meadow beside the stream. The cows raised their heads and ceased to graze, they gazed with calm, mild eyes.

When they reached the outskirts of the camp Ab-Raham began to run as though he had wings, as though he were only twenty. In a loud voice he called for Eliezer and Sur, for his wife. Let them immediately slaughter a young calf, one of the best quality, and a lamb also. Let them prepare the meat swiftly and tastily. The Lord was coming, exalted and noble guests were visiting the camp.

Sarah went out from the tent to wash the new arrivals' feet. Ab-Raham took the bucket from her hands, girded himself with a towel, and kneeling, reverently washed his guests' feet, rubbed them diligently with oil. From time to time he raised his enraptured eyes from his labours, and gazed . . . At Faleh son of Elas? No; beyond Faleh; for through him he was aware of another Form who was to be served only on bended knees.

Sarah and Ketura spread a white linen cloth over the grass. Then they brought delicacies: *dibs*, *debelah*, the oldest wine in a pitcher, milk, cream, butter, honey, cakes in oil, called *rakah*, and cakes in buttermilk, called *halal*, which old Terah had been very fond of in his time. The travellers ate, astonished at this royal reception. Of a truth, they had not expected it. Faleh son of Elas could not shake off the uncomfortable feeling that Ab-Ram had taken him for someone else.

'Many years have passed since my lips last spoke to you,' he began cautiously, to test his supposition.

'It is as Thou sayest, Lord,' Ab-Raham admitted, his face radiant. 'Why hast Thou deigned to visit Thy servant today?'

Faleh son of Elas looked more closely at his host. It was clear that Ab-Raham (as everybody seemed to call him now) was not joking at his friend's expense. All the less did Faleh understand what had happened. By now everybody in the vicinity had noticed that something strange was happening to the master. They had only to glance at his glittering eyes, his beaming face. Of a truth, the guest thought, Ab-Raham, who used to be such a sober-sided, has drunk too deeply of his wine.

He glanced interrogatively at Eliezer, then at the pitcher; but the old servant shook his head vigorously. His master never got drunk. Faleh bowed his head to indicate that there would be no wrong in it if he did, and tilted the pitcher back with satisfaction. His sons ate with the ardour of youth. They were fine, well-grown lads with smooth, still virgin cheeks. As was usual with servants of the temple, their hair had never been cut, and it fell over their shoulders in ringlets. They were wearing short white tunics and blue cloaks; their behaviour was restrained and decorous. They spoke but little, only answering questions, and rising respectfully when their host or their father spoke to them. They were as like each other as someone reflected in a mirror. Faleh gazed at his sons with pride and love.

'Why hast Thou deigned to visit Thy servant today?' Ab-Raham repeated, gazing joyously into space.

'The priests of the city of Ur have sent these two, Segub and Zammah, to this side of the wilderness, to the city of Sedom with an important embassy,' Faleh began to relate. 'And two years ago a kinsman of mine died in Damascus, leaving a childless widow, for their children had died earlier. It pleased me to espouse this widow and to quicken a son to my dead kinsman, so a year ago I sent word by merchants

that I would journey to her. I did not wish to send for her, fearing that her family would retain the robes and adornments which my dead kinsman had bought, and it is always better to see first for oneself. So when I heard that Segub and Zannmoh were to take this road I came with them. In Damascus I took a look at the widow. She is still good for both labour and the couch. But I grieved to part from my sons. Would the gods permit mine eyes to see them again? So I journeyed with them as far as this spot, and I will take back the widow as I return to my house.'

Faleh told his story at length, for the wine was truly strong, and he was beginning to be tipsy. Ab-Raham still wore an expression of absent happiness. Eliezer remarked affably:

'I remember, Faleh, that when I stayed in your house (it was when my lord was withdrawing with his tribe before the Babylonian) the priests had just taken your lads to the temple, and your wife was sorrowing greatly over them. She would flee from Uruk to Ur in order to see them. . . .'

'And she would today, if she could; but she is too old now,' Faleh laughed.

'I remember you told me then of the death of the priest Sep-Sin, which greatly moved my lord. . . .'

Segub intervened in the conversation: • •

'You have uttered a name which it is forbidden to mention in Ur, just as it is forbidden to mention the name of your lord.'

He looked respectfully at his host's face, which reflected Ab-Raham's unconsciousness of his surroundings, and asked him in a lower tone:

'Let your servant's audacity not disturb you, Ab-Raham. Is the cloak you wear on your shoulders the cloak of the dead Nergal-Sar?'

'Yes, it is his cloak,' Ab-Raham answered absently, and returned at once to his secret conversation with his Lord. How strange it was that the others did not hear what he heard, or see what he saw! Of a truth, even he did not see, but he *knew*. He felt that the Lord was visiting his house, the Lord with whom he had made a Covenant. He had greatly desired to fall at His feet, but the Lord was intangible. He had fallen at the feet of Faleh, or of one of his sons. That did not disturb him. The Lord was present, He was at hand, He was here. Ab-Raham was not entirely unconscious of what was going on around him. He saw Faleh, and his sons, and Eliezer; but only scraps of their conversation reached him, and were indifferent and insignificant, as the voices of children playing in the

courtyard reach the ears of a father talking with a king. At this moment the Lord was asking him, 'Where is Sarah thy wife?'

'Behold, she is in the tent, serving my Lord,' Ab-Raham hurriedly answered.

'In a year Sarah thy wife shall have a son,' he heard the answer in his heart. Unable to control his amazement, he cried aloud, repeating the words:

'In a year Sarah will have a son?'

The others struggled to avoid laughing. Crimson with anger, Sarah looked out of the tent. What did that sneer mean? She glanced at Eliezer, they exchanged meaning looks. Ab-Raham was drunk, as drunk as grape in the vat, or as the patriarch Noah when his wicked son Ham had jeered at him.

'It's never too late . . . never too late . . .' Faleh stammered, his tongue entangled in his mouth. Sarah laughed and shrugged her shoulders angrily:

'After I am old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'

Ab-Raham paid no heed to her - he paid no heed to anyone. And, as his exclamation had revealed his inward disbelief, he was at once rebuked with the question:

'Why believest Thou not my words? Wherefore did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord?'

'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' Ab-Raham repeated aloud. 'What are you laughing for, woman? His eyes blazed. His look frightened her, and she replied: 'I laughed not.'

'That is not true, you did laugh.'

'The two twins were watching Ab-Raham attentively. Segub leaned across to Faleh:

'Father, this man is not drunk with the juice of the berry. He is a seer, a *baru*.'

'How do you know?'

'It is still related that Nergal-Sar was such. Not for nothing is he wearing Nergal-Sar's cloak. . . .'

'May the gods have us in their care!' Faleh sighed, fighting the drowsiness that was overcoming him.

The young men wiped their lips and rose together, to indicate that it was time for them to depart. If Ab-Raham had no objection, they would gladly leave their father with him, and turn aside for him when they had

finished their mission. He was old; and, as they had lost much time, they must hasten their steps. They would return in three or four days.

'I will accompany you for a little of the road, my sons,' Faleh told them, though he had difficulty in rising to his feet.

'Leave your father here, I ask you in my lord's name,' Eliezer said, taking the place of Ab-Raham, who was neglecting his duties as a host. 'We shall be very glad to have him. Where are you going?'

'We are going to the city of Sodom, which is said to be a wealthy and sinful city. The priests of Ur have sent us to the priests of Sodom, on a mission which we may not reveal. But we shall see with our own eyes whether the things people say about that city are true. We have never heard any good said of it.'

'Much lewdness is told of the inhabitants of Sodom,' Eliezer assented.

The brothers bowed to the company, and departed, taking their father between them. Ab-Raham walked at their side, and at times went on in advance. He still had his eyes fixed on Someone whom they could not see. He listened and answered, but no one heard his words, uttered within him.

The Lord was saying to him:

'The city of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is very grievous. But a little more, and the scales of My anger will be turned.'

Ab-Raham recalled how he himself had been troubled by the sins of Sodom, how he had himself called down vengeance on the sinners, and had cursed them. But today his soul was filled with joy and grace, for the inexpressibly beautiful world was respiring with happiness and peace, and he felt sorry for anyone on whom the Lord's anger was about to fall. Timidly he raised his eyes to the Light and said:

'Wilt Thou destroy the righteous also with the wicked? It may be that there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt Thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous? Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'

'If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city,' came the answer, 'then will I spare all the place for their sakes.'

But Ab-Raham answered and said:

'Behold now, I have taken it upon me to speak unto the Lord, though I am but dust and ashes. It may be that there shall lack five of the fifty righteous; wilt Thou destroy all the city for the lack of five?'

'If I find there forty and five, I will not destroy it.'

Then Ab-Raham asked yet a third time:

'But it may be there will be forty found there?'

For the third time he heard the Lord's reply:

'I will not do it, for forty's sake.'

'Oh, let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. It may be there will be thirty there.'

'I will not do it if I find thirty there.'

'Behold now, I have taken it upon me to speak unto the Lord. It may be there will be twenty found there.'

'I will not destroy it for twenty's sake.'

'Oh, let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once: It may be there will be ten found there.'

'I will not destroy it for ten's sake - if there be so many righteous in Sodom.'

Ab-Raham rubbed his eyes. The light had faded, and the world turned grey. The beauty, gleam, and colour that had delighted him had vanished. The sheep were grey, their fleeces were filled with dust. The grass was withered; the sky was ashen with the heat. The Lord (Three in One, or One in Three) had departed. Ab-Raham was standing on a rise, beside Faleh and his twin sons, who were staring at him anxiously.

'With whom were you talking, Ab-Raham?' the old man asked.

'With the Lord my God,' Ab-Raham answered simply.

He turned suddenly to the young men:

'The Lord intends to destroy Sodom. But He has promised to stay His hand if there are ten righteous men to be found in that city. Ten righteous men, and the city will not perish.'

They both bowed right down to the ground before him.

'Thou art a seer, Ab-Raham,' said Segub, 'and the gods have revealed hidden things to thee. We will no longer conceal from thee that which thou knowest. The mission on which the priests of Ur have sent us to the priests of Sodom reads thus: "The days of the transient valley of Siddim are drawing to their close. On the clock before the temple the shadow of the sun has drawn back. That is a sign that the earth is raging. Lead out with the utmost speed all the people and their possessions into the mountains, for woe shall fall on those who remain in the valley. The heavens will become as copper above them, and the earth as iron beneath their feet."'

Paying no heed to their words, Ab-Raham repeated:

'Find ten righteous, and they need not depart. Ten righteous, and not one hair will fall from any one's head. Ten righteous, and the city will be left standing. Surely in a great city there will be ten righteous?'

'We think there must be more, for people are of all kinds. Honest men grow up at the side of the wicked, and lame at the side of the straight.'

'Your words are just! Listen! In Sodom first ask for Lot the son of Haran, the Hebrew. He is my nephew, and a righteous man, though too easy-going. Being honest and righteous, he will indicate such as himself, for like are glad of like, and like is attracted to like.'

'We will go first to the priests, for so we are commanded; and afterward we will seek out your nephew, Ab-Raham.'

Segub and Zammoh fell at the two older men's feet, then stepped out briskly. Ab-Raham and Faleh gazed long after them, and turned back to the camp only when the young men had disappeared across the hill.

The Fiery Rain

SEGUB AND ZAMMOH WALKED SWIFTLY, AND LATE IN THE AFTERNOON OF the following day they were descending from the hills into the valley of Siddim. They gazed down at it in delight, for, in its robe of green groves, it seemed like paradise. Was it really possible that all this must perish? It seemed difficult to believe the presages of Ao-Raham and the priests, and now their own mission seemed vexatious. Who would believe them, when they themselves doubted whether they had not been sent here in error? They gazed inquisitively at the cities showing white amid the green, at the azure ribbons of canals intersecting the woods with a gleaming network, at the thick white mist that covered the Salt Lake, and the weird brown smoke billowing up in several places from the woods.

They entered into those dense, scented, marvellous woods. The more they descended from the pass, the more they were struck by the amazing number of animals they met. Huge wild boars passed them, making for the hills; sheep with great horns; foxes and jackals.

'I can see a lion close at hand,' Segub said anxiously.

'A lion does not go hunting in the daytime, brother.'

They went on, and came across increasing numbers of smaller and ~~ger~~ animals. Fat quails flew almost under their feet.

'Zammoh, my brother! They are fleeing.'

'Of a truth, you are right. They are fleeing.'

And in their eyes the beautiful, shady valley turned sombre with a premonition of misfortune. Without a word they hastened their steps, and soon after they reached the gate of Sodom.

Segub regarded himself as the elder, for he had been the first to leave his mother's womb. He said to his brother Zammoh, who was as like him as his reflection in water:

'Cover your head with your cloak and go to the temple to tell the priests what we have been commanded. I will remain in the gateway and inquire about Ab-Raham's nephew, Lot son of Haran, and then will come quickly to you.'

'I will do so, my brother.

The great bronze, heavily gilded gates were wide open. Under the archway there was the usual noisy throng. The hucksters were crying their wares to high heaven. The customers chattered with them unhurriedly. Others were sitting inactive, exchanging news and jests. Crowds of well-dressed people were hastening back from the lakeside, where the king had been making sacrifices to the god of the lake. For the water was seething again. The heavy, almost oily waves were rolling like the body of an enormous, invisible serpent. But the ill presentiments which had commanded the beasts and birds of the forest to flee from the valley were not troubling the minds of the city's inhabitants. Although the day was more than usually sultry, it was in their eyes like all other days. A day of unceasing merriment, idleness, and dissolute amusement.

Wrapped in his cloak, Zammoh went swiftly through the gateway and made for the temple, which he could see rising above the house-roofs. Segub halted in the crowd, and looked about him. Shaking out his tunic before him, he called:

'Greetings to the inhabitants of Sodom! Deign to tell your servant where Lot son of Haran, the Hebrew, dwells.'

A grizzled man rose from his seat by the wall.

'I am Lot son of Haran, the Hebrew. Say what you wish of me, young man.'

'Greetings, son of Haran. Through my lips your uncle, Ab-Raham, greets you also.'

'I do not know any Ab-Raham. Unless it is he who was called Ab-Ram, son of Terah?'

'The same. A worthy man and beloved by the gods. He has sent you a message through me. . . .'

'Blessed be thy feet! Come to my house, that I may give you hospitality, and hear what my uncle, Ab-Ram, commanded you to tell me.'

'In no wise can your servant do that at the moment, for I have another very urgent and important mission. I will come to your house as soon as I have fulfilled it.'

'Then tell me only what my uncle commanded you to say to me.'

“His message will seem strange,” yet I swear by the earth and by fire that I have not changed one word. It is: “Sodom is threatened with destruction. Find ten righteous men in the city of Sodom, and it will not perish.”

‘I do not understand your words,’ Lot replied, shrugging his shoulders. ‘The heat has turned your brain, my boy.’

‘The heat has not turned my brain. I am Segub son of Faleh the son of Elas, from the city of Uruk, a friend of your uncle. Such, and no other words, Ab-Raham commanded me to say to you. The city is threatened with great danger. . . .’

‘What danger? Are foreign soldiers approaching again?’

‘We do not know what danger, and Ab-Raham also did not know. But as I came here I saw the forest beasts fleeing from the valley into the hills.’

‘Last night someone set fire to a pitch-well, probably to annoy the king; and that is why the animals are fleeing.’

‘Son of Haran, we have not been sent without cause. The city is in danger. Ten righteous men will save it. Name them! Ten righteous men clothed in integrity. Where may we seek them?’

‘Not here, in any case!’ Lot laughed derisively. ‘Ten righteous men in this accursed city? The man who thought of that was mad.’

‘Your uncle Ab-Raham said. “Lot son of Haran is righteous, and he will know such as himself, since like rejoices in like. . . .”’

‘I am not righteous!’ Lot cried bitterly. ‘I may have been righteous once. But that passed long ago. I am unrighteous, for I look on daily at the unrighteousness of others. And I do not know one righteous man in all Sodom.’

‘That cannot be, son of Haran. It is a question of the existence of this city. Think, seek, point them out.’

‘Of a truth, my boy, even if it were a question of my own life I could not say anything other to you, than that there are no righteous men in this city. If any such had been preserved he would have fled hence long ago, or would have perished. . . .’

‘Way, way for Bera son of Henos!’ someone shouted. The black slaves preceding the royal retinue pushed the crowd back to the wall. Most of the dignitaries accompanying the king were naked, because of the heat; and the women were thinly veiled with transparent muslin. They were wearing chaplets and jewels, and they were all excited by the sight of the blood which had just been flowing copiously into the lake.

'What a handsome young man, Hebrew; and why are you so agitated?' a stout man wearing a crown of feathers, in imitation of the head-dress of the god Beese, asked Lot in a croaking voice. He had a lumpish head and a short body.

'Do you know of ten righteous men in this city?'

'Ten righteous men, clothed in integrity, and fearing the gods.'

The fat man laughed aloud, with one hand holding his feathers on his head.

'By the perfumed bosom of the goddess, the dear protectress of this city! I don't even know two righteous men. Not even one! But I know a thousand scoundrels, a thousand rakes, a thousand blasphemers, a thousand impious. . .'

'This young man has come from afar, and he says that if ten righteous men are not found in the city Sodom will perish.'

'We have long been without one righteous man in this city, but it has not yet perished.'

'Show us this prophet!'

The king himself halted his litter, and looked out from it, amused at the conversation. Bera son of Henos had not changed much over the years.

'Come to my palace tomorrow, young man,' he said graciously. 'I will show you something better than righteousness, namely, the royal favour. . . .'

'What is the righteousness he is talking about?' a woman cried.

'Rather ask how many shekels you have to pay for it to the hucksters at the gate.'

'By what measure? The priests' or the king's?'

'A righteous man is one who always speaks the truth.'

'Then he must be a barbarian, a wild shepherd from the wilderness. How would I dare to affront our beautiful Egel by telling the truth about her age?'

'You're being stupid, Kaata,' an aged, heavily painted woman hissed.

'What, tell the truth about what you really feel for Bera son of Henos?'

'Bera son of Henos, may he live for ever, knows the hearts of his subjects; he knows that they love him, and he knows what they wish him. . . .'

The king laughed. 'That the jackals should have his bones as soon as possible,' he interrupted.

'Ingrate! I shall be both a righteous and a truthful man when I say that in all the world you are the greatest king of the drunkards.'

'So I am, and so I shall remain,' Bera admitted with pride. 'Boy, what is your name? Come to my palace tomorrow. You are very handsome. . . .

'My name is Segub son of Faleh. O king, live for ever! Deign to listen to my words. I have been sent by the priests of Ur to warn you against danger. . . . The gods have sent very threatening omens. The shadow on the clock. . . .'

The rest of the sentence was drowned in the general laughter.

'Beautiful Segub, do you really believe in the gods? We do not. From the day when Bera son of Henos, may he live for ever, dropped the high priest El-Gad into the waters of the lake in which one cannot drown, and soldiers watched day and night with spears, pushing him back when he approached the bank, the gods have become as docile as lambs.'

'Why, they do not even always ask for sacrifices. For instance, there was not one priest in attendance at the bank of the lake today.'

The king waved his hand, the runners moved on, the retinue passed through the gateway. The royal litter was followed by others. An old, painted woman with rotting teeth looked out from one of them.

'Young man,' she lisped, 'you come to me. You come at once. I will give you gifts more beautiful than the king's.'

'He'd make a dainty tidbit for you, Jeheliah!' the crowd roared. 'Don't you go with her, Segub son of Faleh. If you do you'll die.'

'Don't you believe their evil tongues. Come, boy!' the old woman whined insistently.

Zammoh, still wrapped in his cloak, came unnoticed to the gate, and set his mouth to his brother's ear. 'I cannot find the priests anywhere,' he whispered. 'The temple and the tower are deserted. There is no one there. And it is the same in the second temple. I have sought everywhere, but I have found no one.'

'They have fled,' Segub guessed.

'So I think.'

They stood considering what to do. Getting no answer from Segub, Jeheliah stepped out of her litter. He shuddered as he felt her thin, clawing hand on his shoulder.

'Come with me,' she repeated. 'And you, don't try to stop him.'

She pushed Zammoh away, and his cloak slipped from his head. She started back in astonishment.

'By all the gods! There are two of them. Two of them!'

'You're seeing double, Jeheliah!'

'But she's right. Look! There are two of them. Are they men or demons? Tell us, young man, whence have you come? From heaven or the bowels of the earth?'

'You are in luck, Jeheliah! There's one for you and one for the king.'

'Both of you come with me!' the old woman wheedled greedily.

Though Lot was as surprised as the other Sodomites, he took the two brothers by the arm.

'Come to my house,' he said. 'You are my guests. I respect Ab-Ram son of Terah, and love him as my own father. Blessings on him who comes in the name of Ab-Ram!'

He pushed Jeheliah roughly aside and led the brothers to his house.

'It's sultry, it's stifling; I cannot breathe,' Edith complained as she lay on silken cushions spread out on the terrace. She was still very beautiful, and was very elegantly dressed, though her attire, Sodomite fashion, consisted mainly of nakedness adorned with jewels.

'I am thirsty with this sultriness,' she said. 'Give me some water.'

Her elder daughter, Thamar, who was sitting nearer to her, handed her a cup of water and wine. Rose petals, added for their scent, were floating on the surface. Both the daughters, but especially the younger, auburn-haired Lilith, were still very beautiful, though they had reached the age which a woman normally passes at the side of her husband and children. But their father, who was still repelled by Sodom and Sodomite practices, had sworn that he would give his daughters to upright young men from other parts. However, though he had had sufficient courage to take such an oath, he had lacked the courage to look for such men. He was always talking of paying a visit to his uncle, to find sons-in-law among his own tribe, but Edith would not hear of it. She scoffed at him for wanting to betroth his daughters to shepherds, and incited the girls to reject any such match. Overborne and afflicted, for the time being Lot did no more than wait for some happy accident that would bring young men from other districts to his house, and he watched over his daughters to ensure that they did not become like other Sodomite women. He could never have managed that, for both Thamar and Lilith had a fiery temperament, and, as is well known, it is easier to keep wind in a bag than keep guard over a maiden. But Lot found an unexpected ally in Edith. A woman can always

make a fool of a man, but never of another woman. Edith watched like a wildcat over her daughters, 'pretending that she did so for their own good, but in reality governed by the fear that their youthful beauty would put her fading charms into the shade. So time passed, and the years fled by.

Setting her manicured fingers with their purple nails to the nezem, Edith carefully raised it, breathed on the rose petals, and set the cup to her lips. She made a wry face.

'How unpleasant! It's warm!' she snorted, setting the cup down. 'Kora must have kept it deliberately in the sun. The water Sella provided was always cold. Bring some fresh water,' she ordered Lilith.

The girl went down the steps; her auburn hair gleamed in the sun. Edith stretched herself out on the cushions, and again complained of the sultriness.

'There is going to be a storm,' Thamar declared, gazing over the balustrade into the heart of the valley. 'And the pitch wells are still smoking. . . .'

'The king will impale alive those who played that trick. The loss of pitch will be dreadful!'

'They say nobody set them alight. They caught fire of themselves. . . . Look, mother, a whole flock of birds is flying out from the forest up to the hills. I've never seen so many. . . .'

'I expect the king is out hawking.'

'The king has just returned from the lakeside, where he has been making sacrifices. Look, mother! What a strange cloud is hanging over the lake.' 'o

'Look, mother! Look, mother!' Edith mimicked her discontentedly. 'Here am I really ill with the heat and my daughter is continually asking me to twist my neck and look at birds or clouds. Of a truth you have no thought for your mother.'

Thamar said no more, but she went on gazing at the sky. Her attention was diverted by steps and voices coming from downstairs. Then Lilith's head shone like burnished copper above the edge of the roof, as she came up the stairs.'

'Father has brought home two young men!' she cried joyfully. 'Come! We will wash their feet.'

When the horde of revelling Sodomites began to knock at the door of Lot's house the city was already wrapped in an early, extraordinary

twilight. The cloud which had attracted Thamar's attention had now drawn closer, had grown denser. The sunlight piercing the hanging pall of the cloud shone a brilliant yellow. In that light all objects changed their natural hues. The grass seemed to be flaxen, a sapphire looked amaranthine, human faces were a pale green. The lake had disappeared from sight; it was covered by an impenetrable, steamy mist. From behind that veil came a whistling and roaring as of a storm, though the leaves of the trees were not stirred by the least breath of wind. Heedless of all this, the drunken throng of revellers rattled the door violently.

'Hey, hey! Lot, the Hebrew! Open to us! Come out!'

Reluctantly Lot went out to them. They at once surrounded him.

'Where are those two young men who are as beautiful as angels? Show them to us.'

'You have kept them for your own daughters, you cunning foreigner. That won't work! Let them come out!'

'We'll see whether they're demons or mortals.'

'They're spreading alarm and despondency. They must be punished.'

'Men of Sodom!' Lot cried. 'Listen to my words. You laugh at the gods, but now the gods have come to show themselves to you.'

'Ha! Ha! Hebrew, let us have these gods!'

Lot set himself firmly in front of the door.

'Friends!' he said in a conciliatory tone. 'Let your tumult cease. The young men are my guests, I will not put them out of my house until they themselves desire to leave. . . .'

'We know you! You mean until you have betrothed them to your daughters! Let us in! We'll take them ourselves.'

'I will not!'

'Oh, so you won't let us in! Someone bring a beam, we'll smash the door down.'

Their jesting mood was quickly turning to anger with the foreigner who was opposing their lust. Lot was in despair. His conception of the sacred rights of hospitality, which he had imbibed with his mother's milk and had been brought up always to respect, commanded him to defend his visitors even at the cost of his own life. But he tried once more to convince the mob.

'Men and women of Sodom,' he began, 'these young men have broken my bread. The salt has been set between us. I will give you all you wish, but leave them in peace. . . .'

'You're wasting your breath. We want nothing except those two.'

For the first time in his life Lot rose to heroic heights.

'I'll bring my daughters out to you,' he shouted, 'but leave the lads alone.'

'Your daughters went rancid long ago. You should have done that earlier. It's rather late to palm them off on us.'

'Enough of talking! Someone bring a beam.'

'Stop! Stop! What's that? By the gods, what is happening?'

They all felt the earth beneath their feet shuddering with a long, secret shiver. The branches of the trees began to rustle, though there was not the least wind. Before they could recover from their alarm there was a piercing shriek farther down the street:

'Woe! Woe! The gods are fleeing from the city.'

The street began to swarm with people. From the direction of the temple came a drumming noise. Everybody hastily leaped aside as, with manes tossing, nostrils flaming, the two sacred horses normally guarded by the priests galloped towards them. The crowd besieging Lot's house ran out into the middle of the street. The bay stallion halted for a moment, sniffing at the ground and pawing it with its hooves. Then with a terrifying neigh it reared on to its hindlegs and flung itself at the crowd. The people hardly had time to fling themselves down or scatter in confusion. The milk-white mare dashed into the breach made by the stallion and tore on, its hooves thundering. They flew through the gateway, dispersing the guards that attempted to stop them, and the sound of their hooves was heard on the road for some time. Meanwhile, Lot rushed inside his house and barred it from within with a stout beam.

During this incident Edith with her two daughters and the sons of Faleh were eating a meal on the terrace. The food was elaborate, and the utensils were of the finest. Edith stealthily watched to see what impression all this luxury made on the guests, but they were completely absorbed in other matters.

'Let us get away from the city,' Segub was arguing. 'Only fools or madmen laugh at such a time. Let anyone who delights in the sun depart, and so lengthen his days.'

'Let us go!' the girls exclaimed.

Edith shook with anger. Her gold nezem danced up and down on her lips as she hurriedly declared that she had no intention of departing. Why should she? Because a storm was coming up? When a storm is

raging the safest place of all was one's own home. Was anyone else fleeing from the city? The king, for instance? Or the priests? Surely they were not lacking in intelligence and were mindful of their souls. . . .

'Woman!' Zammoh interrupted her: 'The priests have already fled. I have been in the temple, and there was no one there.'

She waved her hand contemptuously.

'I expect they found out that the king was intending to vent his anger on them again. Believe me, young men, these continual quarrels between Bera son of Henos and the priests are amusing. Who knows whether it wasn't they who set fire to the wells in order to terrify the people and cause loss to the king?'

'Woman, act as you think best. We shall depart as soon as our host, your husband returns, for it would be unseemly for us to go without thanking him for his hospitality. We have been sent even from Ur, from the other side of the great desert, to warn the priests of Sodom that the city is in danger. Do you think that has been done in jest, or to annoy the king?'

She did not know what to answer, but she obstinately shook her head. She had decided not to yield, and to remain in Sodom. Abandon so much, all their possessions? Not for anything!

Lot returned to the terrace, annoyed with the revelers and anxious of mind.

'Some rather alarming things are happening,' he said. 'A little while ago it seemed as though the earth sighed. The sacred horses have broken out of the temple and fled from the city. . . . And look how the pitch wells are burning!'

They turned and gazed. In the increasing, extraordinary twilight, crimson columns of fire were starting up among the trees, clearly illuminating all their branches.

'I didn't think there were so many wells as that,' he said doubtfully. 'And were they so close to the city?'

'Son of Haran,' the twins said, 'take your family and let us depart from this place.'

'If ten righteous men could be found in the city not one tower would fall from anyone's head,' Segub added. 'But if there is not one, the city will perish. So Ab-Raham, your uncle, declared. . . .'

'Ab-Ram?' Edith sniffed. 'That shepherd of sheep? Of the truth, a renowned seer. . . . And what did the seer Ab-Ram say?'

The question went without answer, for at that moment the house

began to rock violently, like a boat on the sea. The doors rattled, the stairs creaked, the walls began to crack, and the rocking did not cease. They were all thrown to the floor. The fine utensils of glass and valuable white clay rolled about, jangling and breaking.

'Let us flee while there is yet time!' Segub cried.

Groping in the sudden darkness, clinging fearfully to the swaying stairs, they went down. It seemed that the servants had already fled. The door was open to the street, but no one was outside, no one was thinking to enter. Still keeping her wits about her, Edith went to her room, snatched up her jewel casket and, clutching it convulsively, followed her husband out. The earth began to tremble again. They saw the palace opposite lean over first backward then forward, like a drunken man; the columns of the portico slowly bent like legs doubled at the knees; for a moment the walls bulged like the sides of a pitcher, then the entire building crumbled down, hurling rubble right across the street. The roar of its fall must have been terrible, but no one heard it in the overwhelming tumult that suddenly filled the city. Houses were tumbling down everywhere. The streets were packed with people fleeing like a river swollen with rushing water. The dense cloud had descended still lower, and there was almost total darkness, though the evening was still young. Human faces had the hue of ash. In the darkness the people were fighting, scrambling to be the first out of the city. Two women with a child riding on a donkey ran into a crowd on foot. A man swept the women and child off the ass with one blow of his fist and mounted the animal himself. He thrashed it furiously with his heels, but the animal could not go faster, for it was wedged in the crowd. The general flight was held up by a barrier of stone from a fallen house; they rushed into it headlong, cursed frightfully, and turned back, treading on one another.

'Way! Way!' came the well-known shout of the king's litter-bearers, four powerful Sudanese, who brought their staves down on people's heads as they made a way for themselves by brute force. They had dropped the litter, and now were concerned only for their own safety. Bera son of Henos crawled awkwardly from under the overturned box and, puffing, sweating, ran towards the gate with the others, shouting in terror: 'To me, men of Sodom! Rally round your king! I will reward you magnificently!' But no one took any notice of him. Women shrieked and wailed in the darkness. Children were crying. Suddenly above all else rose the shout: 'The slaves are plundering the houses!' For a moment the

crowd swayed to and fro; some wanted to turn back to defend their property, but the more prudent pressed on, to get away from the crumbling walls. No one had any thought for others. In the struggle hair was torn out, bones were broken, legs thrust out to trip up others. As the crowds increased they packed together into a solid mass, and barred their own progress. In the gateway a living wedge of struggling, bawling, interlocked bodies effectively blocked all egress.

'We shall never get through here,' Segub shouted. 'We must try another gate.'

But it was impossible to make headway against the current of onward-pressing people. The earth shook again; they felt it pulsing underfoot like the pulse of a hard-driven runner. Their nostrils caught the scent of some animal. This time it was not an ass, but a lion, pressing close against them. It was followed by two leopards, which bounded and leaped over the people's heads. The walls of the circus had fallen away, and the wild beasts kept for spectacles had escaped and were fleeing, taking no notice of the human beings, leaping over all obstacles. The overhanging cloud drizzled a fine dust over everything, spreading a pall beneath which even those still alive seemed dead.

'I know a secret passage through the wall just behind our house,' Lot suddenly remembered.

They extricated themselves from the crowd and hurried back through the house into the garden. The wicket gate, the one through which Hibal had slipped long before to get help for his master, had been unused for years; it was firmly fastened with nails. With the strength of despair Lot and the twins tore away the wood. Outside the wall were dense trailers of climbing thorns, barring the road. They struggled through the thorns, to emerge into the darkness of the waste land outside the city wall. But they had no time for rest. The brothers seized the girls by the hand, Lot took hold of his wife, and they ran. All round them the world was terrifying in its horror. The torches of the wells were flaming and casting a lurid glare on the cloud overhanging the city. The sky had gone coppery, as had been predicted. Their eyes, throats and noses were filled with ash and an indefinite, poisonous stench that drugged their consciousness. They staggered as they ran. Suddenly Edith stopped short, as though rooted to the ground.

'My jewels!' she stammered, spitting out ash. 'I have left my jewels in the passage through the wall.'

'Let them go! Think not of them, woman!' Lot replied, tugging at her hand. But she angrily tore herself out of his grasp.

'I shall return for my jewels. I shall overtake you.'

'You'll be lost! Come on!'

'I shan't. I'll overtake you.'

He tried to detain her by force, but she avoided his grip and turned back, rushing down the slope. For a brief moment they saw her robe showing white in the grey-brown haze.

'Let those perish who wish to,' Segub cried. 'We must flee! Quickly!'

They seized Lot by the hand and forced him to go with them, for he stood hesitating, all but ready to rush after his wife. 'Don't go, father!' the girls sobbed. 'Let us flee,' the twins repeated. 'If she comes back, we'll wait for her on the hill.'

They ran their fastest, choking, all but fainting. At last they came to the first hill outside the city, and halted. There they stood frozen with horror. For at that moment the cloud of steam which had covered the Salt Lake all day was torn asunder, and from the depths of the lake a column of smoke, fire, and water towered up. With a deafening roar it pierced through the cloud of ash, to grope into the sky, and spread out in the shape of an enormous mushroom, a fiery tree, with branches that extended over the city and fell in a fiery rain on the houses, and on the people still crowded at the gates. Terrified by that dread sight, Lot and the others turned and ran again, falling, crawling along, painfully, gasping air into their burning throats, though it cut their lungs like knives. The flaming cloud pursued them and reached out to their heads, their hair was matted with pitch, the grass withered and burned before their feet, the bushes withered with the heat, the girls' robes smouldered. They put out the licking flames with their hands, they choked, they staggered to a standstill, with their last strength they ran to keep ahead of the fire. Until they reached a height on which, like a merciful breath of grace, the cool breath of an eastern wind struck them in their faces, and set a bound to the flames.

They dragged a few steps farther, and fell as though dead. Here the earth was not consumed with fire, no ash fell on them, no smoke stifled them. They lay on the very bounds set between the world of the living and the world of the condemned, at the edge of a fiery abyss from which there was neither escape nor rescue. They could not understand by what miracle they had come out of that abyss alive. They gazed down at the

valley which only a few hours before had been a green paradise, shady, luxuriant, now it was transformed into a roaring gulf, like the furnace flaming before the monstrous dwarf Beezebub, into which children were thrown. The fire spurting up from the earth intercrossed in the sky like plumes of flaming palms, and fell in fire again. Columns of fire burst again and again from the depths of the lake, spouting up white-hot stones that hailed all over the valley. Beneath these fiery missiles they saw the hills bounding like sheep, and the forests laid in swathes like grain. The flames that burst through the earth were a lurid crimson, those from the lake were a dazzling white, those from the sulphur and soda deposits on the bank were green, violet, and yellow. A rain of ash illumined with fire and billowing with smoke fell incessantly over everything, like an unending curtain. From time to time the curtain was torn aside, to reveal the walls of the city of Sodom still standing, still gleaming a deathly white. But at once the fire and ash covered them, until the fiery element filled all the valley to the brim, like water filling a bowl.

5.

The Sins of the World

TO AB-RAHAM AND FALEH SON OF ELAS THE TIME SEEMED TO DRAG PAST interminably. Ab-Raham was anxious for the city which was threatened with destruction, and for his nephew dwelling in that city; Faleh was troubled about his dearly loved sons. The day after the twins' departure Ab-Raham went alone at night to the top of a hill, and in the south-east saw a crimson glare far over the sky. Its source was hidden, and that which Ab-Raham saw was only the reflection of a great conflagration. His heart clenched with alarm, for it was obviously a very great fire. He stood long gazing and wondering whether it was really impossible to find ten righteous men in any city of human beings. For the Lord would not break His promise. When he returned to the camp he said nothing to Faleh of what he had seen, for the old man was already so anxious that he could not sleep.

At last, early in the morning of the fifth day they saw the two lads approaching. It was difficult to recognise them: their fine curling hair and their brows and eyelashes were tarred, their clothes were in ribbons, and their faces wore a serious expression they had lacked before. The youthful, carefree air had vanished from the faces of the two who had been granted to see the Lord's Day of Judgement. But they were alive and well, though hungry and tired. Their old father wept with joy and fed them as though they were little children. As they ate they described what they had seen. But as they recalled those scenes they lost their appetite and asked their father to remove the plate, for their throats choked at the very memory, and their eyes revealed their horror. All the men of the tribe came and, seated in a ring round them, listened in dread. And they glorified the God of Ab-Raham, when they heard from the lads' own mouths how he had foretold the destruction of the sinful city, whereas the Sodomite gods had warned no one and had been burnt like logs in a

fire. Ab-Raham was delighted to hear that the youngsters had conducted Lot and his daughters as far as the gate of the city of Zoar, which stood on a height beyond the reach of the flames, and so his kinsman was alive and safe. He wanted to keep Faleh and his sons in the camp until the lads had fully recovered; but as soon as they had rested a little they insisted that their father must make ready for the journey. 'The priests will be angered if we idle our time,' they explained.

Ab-Raham could not persuade them to stay, and they said farewell. Before their departure the twins held a whispered consultation with their father, and Faleh son of Elas turned and bowed low to his friend.

'My sons Segub and Zammoh say,' he said, 'that they have had great success with the daughters of your nephew, Lot son of Haran. It seems they are beautiful maidens, and different from the other daughters of Sodom. They would like to take them as their wives. They did not venture to speak to Lot on the matter, for servants of the temple must first obtain the priests' permission. . . . No one sets a net for the bird without first agreeing with the lord of the forest. But I thought it right, Ab-Raham, to ask what you think of their intentions. For it would be a great joy to your servant if I could become related to your line.'

Ab-Raham was sincerely delighted, and he replied:

'Lot himself must decide in regard to his daughters. This only can I say to you, Faleh, that he will find no better sons-in-law in all the land; and as your boys Segub and Zammoh saved these maidens from death, they rightly belong to them. I surmise that Lot now possesses nothing, having lost all his possessions in the destruction of Sodom, so I will give his daughters dowries as if they were my own.'

They gladly drank wine to seal this preliminary agreement, and the father and sons departed. Now Ab-Raham expected from day to day to see his nephew, and was surprised that he delayed. Where had he halted? Why did he not come direct to his uncle? The one obstacle, Edith, had gone. Ab-Raham half decided to go and look for his kinsman himself, then he planned to send Eliezer. But the autumn season had brought many anxieties, as usual, and much labour that required the presence of both the lord and his faithful servant. When the first rains, which that year were very heavy, began to pour down, Ab-Raham decided to go to find Lot in the spring. Meanwhile, as the downpour imprisoned everybody in the tents, he meditated persistently on the destruction of Sodom. He recalled every word Segub's sons had spoken, linked them with the ominous glare

he himself had seen in the night, and was amazed in spirit that the presence of such a small handful, of ten righteous men, could have averted those terrible events and saved many thousands of people from death. Righteousness must be of very great value in the eyes of the Lord.

'Lot son of Haran has arrived,' Mosā announced one day; but then she corrected herself:

'A man has come who says he is Lot son of Haran.'

'Where is he?' Ab-Raham asked, rejoicing in spirit.

'He has remained out there, waiting. . . .'

She pointed to the hill opposite, the same hill on which he had once seen the Three Men of Light, and whence on the night of the Lord's Anger he had seen the glare of the burning cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ab-Raham ran to meet his nephew. He hurried until the cloak spread out over his shoulders. Seeing him coming, the man, who was seated on a stone, rose and walked a few steps towards him. But was it Lot? Now Ab-Raham understood Mosā's guarded words. It was undoubtedly Lot, but he was changed almost beyond recognition, aged, and bowed, hairy, with a look of sorrow on his face. He was dressed in a soiled and ragged robe, covered with a cloak of goat's hair, not woven, but felted, such as are worn by the poorest of shepherds. He fell to the ground before his uncle, and burst into sobbing. In vain did Ab-Raham try to raise the poor wretch, to embrace him. Lot refused to rise.

'Where are your daughters?' Ab-Raham asked impatiently. 'Why have you been so long in coming? I have been waiting for you. Come to my tent, which is your tent.'

Lot shook his head.

'I will not come, uncle, and will not touch you until I have told you all.'

'You will do no such thing. First you will wash, dress in fresh garments, and eat your fill, then you can pour out your soul to me.'

He took his nephew by the arm; but Lot, with a resolution unusual for him, resisted.

'I will pour out my soul to you here, and I will not stir from this spot until I have done so.'

'Then let it be as you wish. I know already what has come upon you,' Ab-Raham said affectionately. 'The sons of Faleh, Segub and Zammoh, have been here and told me everything.'

And, knowing how dearly Lot loved his daughters, thinking his

nephew was troubled to know how he could give them in marriage without a dowry, he added with a smile:

'They have had great success with your daughters, and they will be coming to you before long to ask for them as their wives. I shall bestow dowries upon them. . . .'

He was astonished, for at these words Lot burst into such weeping as though his heart were broken. And he fell again to the rainsoaked ground and beat his head against it, writhing all his body. Ab-Raham did not know what to do, he thought his nephew must have gone mad under his misfortunes. Nor would that have been surprising. He sat down on the stone Lot had occupied, and waited until the weeper had wept all his tears away, for there was nothing else he could do.

At last Lot calmed down, raised his head, rubbed his eyes with his dirty hand, and sat down on the ground.

'Come with me to the camp,' Ab-Raham said sympathetically.

'I will not go. Deign, uncle Ab-Raham, first to hear all that has happened to me since the sons of Falch departed from me.'

He covered his shivering knees with his cloak and, raising his ill-looking, tear-stained face to his uncle, told his story:

'When we escaped, Segub and Zammoh asked me whither I wished to go. I said I would go to the city of Zoar, which is situated on a height. There I had a friend. They conducted us right to the gate, and, saying farewell, they departed. In the city everybody was standing on the walls and the roofs, gazing at the fire with a terrible fear. I went to my friend, one Saddai son of Isur; but when he saw us he cried out in alarm, thinking he saw spirits. For we were like people returning from *Sheol*, half-conscious, tormented, our hair smothered with pitch; my girls' thin robes were torn, and they were almost naked to the eye. "Take us in, Saddai," I said. "Great is our misfortune, for we have fled from Sodom." And he said: "In no wise may you remain here, for even if I agreed, others would kill you as soon as they knew of your presence. You have brought the anger of the gods down on your heads, and you want to do the same with us." "Give us, I pray you, at least cloaks to cover us, for we are naked: and milk or water, for our throats are burnt with ash and the smoke has scorched our eyes." Saddai, a good man, brought us out three cloaks, like this one, and a mug of milk and a loaf of bread each, insisting that we depart at once. He told us of a cave not far from the city, and counselled us to take shelter there. I dragged myself to the cave with my daughters.

Lilith was completely exhausted, I had to carry her; Thamar staggered and reeled as though drunk. It was night, but it was as clear as day because of the fire which continually flew down from heaven and started up from the earth. And, looking down from the mountain, I could not distinguish where Sodom had been, where Gomorrah, and where Admah; it was like looking for a particular grain of meal in a boiling cauldron.

'We found the cave Saddai had spoken of. It was dry, and in one corner was a heap of last-year's litter. I knew that neither lion nor leopard would come out hunting that night, and it would not be necessary to bar the entrance. We dug into the litter and wrapped ourselves in the cloaks, but not one of us slept. The girls cried and trembled and huddled against me. From the cave we could see the fire of the anger of the gods still raging in the valley, and the smell of sulphur and burning reached us even there. We felt as though of all the world only we three were left, solitary and accursed, and possessing nothing but the cloaks of goat-hair Saddai had given us. Our feet were bleeding and blistered, though we had not been conscious of it when fleeing.

'We remained in the cave all night, and all the next day and night, not sleeping, only gazing down into the valley, where the fire seemed to be dying away. In the afternoon of the third day the cloud of ash and smoke drew aside a little, and I saw with a great terror that the lake had left its banks and had spread over all the valley from hills to hills. Where there had been fire, now there was water. And all that had remained of the cities, and the trees, and everything that had grown and multiplied in the valley, was covered. But the city of Zoar was left, surrounded by water, standing as though on a little rocky islet emerging from the lake, which now was smooth and still, but twice as large as before. And the smell of sulphur and burning continued, filling the throat with unbearable fumes. The girls could not see their wounded feet to the ground, so I told them to wait quietly for me; and I went down to the shore of the new lake, where formerly there had been a high-road into the valley, and found the way by which we had fled. Everywhere the earth was burnt, not a blade of grass was left at all, only cold ashes and thick layers of salt. I think centuries will pass before anything grows there again. . . . I was afraid to go any further, and was about to turn back; but then I saw her in the distance. . . .'

'Whom did you see?'

'My wife, Edith. . . . At least, I thought it must be she, for it was of a

shape, that somehow seemed like a woman caught in flight at the very edge of the water. I went closer, but it was a stone thickly covered with salt. No one could ever tell what was hidden beneath that deposit of salt: a woman, or a stump. I only know that there had never been a pillar like it in that spot before. I often walked along that road, so I know. It could have been Edith, for she would have come that way after us. . . .

He stopped, and his eyes started out of his head with an expression of unfading horror.

'I went back again to Zoar, and asked Saddai to have mercy on us and allow us to enter the city. But he would not hear of it. "We had a good city," he said, "and people came to us to buy and sell all kinds of goods; but now it is as though we were sitting on a tongue of land (and they already call the place Lisan, a tongue) with water all round us, and we shall probably die of hunger, for whom shall we trade with? I have helped you all I could, what more do you want?" But as he was a good man he brought me out another pitcher of wine and five barley cakes. "Don't come to me again," he said, "Nobody here will welcome you."

'I returned to the girls, who were going out of their minds with fear, for some animal appeared to be roaming about outside the cave. I took out the barley cakes, and we ate and drank and drank till we were drunk, for we were very cold and hungry. Our bones were warmed with the wine, and we lay down on the litter. Tamar lay beside me on the right, Lilith on the left. They kissed my feet and hands, laid their heads on my breast and wept in their affliction: "What shall we do, father? Oh, what shall we do. You locked us away in the house so that no man should know us, and now no man is left on the earth who would wish to take us to his bed. For the curse of the gods is upon us, and so we are driven away from the city of Zoar, and we shall be driven away from every other city. What are we to do now? We shall wither like barren stalks." And they wept bitterly, until they moved my soul. I comforted them and caressed them. . . . We were very unhappy, uncle Ab-Raham. We had lost everything; we were under a curse, and we had the memory of that great fire. . . . Every night when I slept I dreamed of fire. . . . And when I awakened with a cry I again saw fire as though it were real. . . . So I comforted my daughters as best I could. . . . Uncle Ab-Raham, I was drunk. . . .

'And what then?' Ab-Raham asked, not understanding. 'Why didn't you come, you and your daughters, straight to me, instead of asking mercy of strangers?'

'We did not have the strength for such a journey, and the girls were ashamed because they were naked beneath the shepherds' cloaks. . . . And later . . . when we discovered . . .'

Seeing that Ab-Raham still did not understand, he was silent for a moment, then burst out in despair:

'They are with child. . . .'

'Woe!' Ab-Raham cried. He rose from the stone and began to pace backward and forward, faster and faster. The confession appeared to have brought ease to Lot, for he rested his head on his knees and sat motionless.

'Woe!' Ab-Raham repeated. A violent anger was boiling within him, and he struggled to restrain himself from seizing his nephew in his hands, and strangle him on the spot. He looked with fury and abhorrence at this weak-willed creature, this coward, this fool, who all his life had been under the sway of women, and in the end had himself most horribly defamed his own daughters, whom he loved, whom he had watched over for so long.

'What am I to do with you?' he shouted at Lot, halting his steps.

'Judge me, uncle, according to the law,' Lot replied quietly, not raising his head. 'Judge me, but spare the girls, for they are in no wise to blame for what has happened.'

Without answering, Ab-Raham again began to stride to and fro, still wrestling with his anger. He was filled with loathing. The Sodomite! He had himself become like the nest in which he had chosen to reside. Accursed city, and accursed. . . . He stopped himself just in time. In his anger he had all but cursed his own blood.

'Depart from my sight, or I shall kill or curse you,' he shouted.

'Do even so, uncle. I am deserving of death, and I have long been accursed. My grandfather Terah died without blessing me. . . .'

The guilty man's humility appeased Ab-Raham's fury a little.

'Why have you come here to tell me of your monstrous deed?'

'To whom else should I go? Your God knows I came that you might justly punish me. You are my goel, you saved me from enslavement. . . . To you belongs the right of judgement upon me.'

Ab-Raham once again turned to pacing to and fro. The shame Lot had brought upon the race was a misfortune to which he could not reconcile himself. He felt a growing desire to cry: "Say that you lie! That you did not do this thing!" Then again he felt that he must kill the transgressor, so that all trace of him should perish from the earth. . . . But as he walked,

suddenly he was struck by the thought that if Lot had not gone to dwell in Sodom this thing would not have happened.

If Lot had remained in the tribe, he would still be living as an upright man. Who was most to blame for his departure? Who said: 'We will part'? Ab-Raham himself, Lot's uncle, Lot's goel. He knew, or he should have known, that in sending his nephew away he was handing him into the toils of a dishonourable, lustful woman; he knew that, but he had done it in order to gain himself a little peace.

To the astonishment of Lot, who was still sitting motionless, Ab-Raham suddenly halted and cried out in a loud voice: 'Lord, pardon my offence!'

Then he began to walk up and down again. They were both silent. At last Ab-Raham asked in a rather quieter tone:

'What did you do after that? Where did you go with your concubines?'

'I went back with my poor children to the shore of the lake which had once been the Valley of Forests. And let God do ill unto me and let it come upon me, if I lie when I say that we all three wept bitterly and regretted that the sons of Falah had saved us from the fire.'

'A second time, son of Haran, you have called on my God. . . .'

'I know that that day was the day of His anger, not that of the gods who were consumed with fire in their temples. . . . I fear Your God. . . .'

'What did you do then? Say on.'

'We were again very hungry. I noticed that my daughters had gold ear-rings in their ears. I took out the ear-rings and went off to sell them. I was afraid to go to the city of Zoar, so I wandered on to the next city, a very small one, where I had never been before. There they took me for a beggar. I sold the ear-rings very cheaply, though they were beautiful; for everybody who looked at them thought I had stolen them. And I did not dare to say whence I had come, lest I should be driven away again. I was given half a silver minar for them, and I bought flour, oil, and figs, and rented a hut, where we are now dwelling. There I left the girls and came to you. . . . And now, uncle, you know all and can judge me. . . .'

He rested his face again on his knees, in an attitude of utter weariness. And there was silence between them once more.

'Blessed be the Lord,' said Ab-Raham, 'who caused me to show mercy to the drover Hiel, who slept in the bosom of his daughter Azubah. If I had shed his blood, as the law decreed, I would have to shed your blood, son of Haran; for it must not be said in the tribe that the chief applied one measure to his servant and another to his kinsman. . . . Of a truth, the

'king or Uru-saem, a priest and a man of great wisdom, said wisely that the merciful shall himself find mercy. So I shall do to you as I did to Hiel. . . . Let him go free; I let you, too, go free. Go whither you wish. I did not forbid the women to give Azubah flour and oil; I will give support to you also. Wait on the hill until Eliezer brings you an ass, food, robes for the three of you, and a little gold, that you may have something on which to live. . . .'

'Dare I kiss your feet, uncle?' Lot asked.

There was such a note of submission and gratitude in his voice that the tears sprang to Ab-Raham's eyes. He was filled with deep compassion for the transgressor, who had confessed himself of his transgression with such affliction and contrition. He had difficulty in restraining his desire to embrace his nephew and press him to his breast. But he knew he had no right to do that. He was empowered to pardon the transgressor in his own heart, but he was not empowered to wipe out the sin the transgressor had committed. The sin continued; it lay as heavy as a stone, inexorable, and its effects would pass down from generation to generation. Nothing could remove it, nothing could allow it to be forgotten.

Doing violence to his own feelings, he answered:

'Dare not touch my feet, blood of mine. . . .'

'It is as you say. . . . I dare not. . . .'

Lot quietly admitted, and made ready to depart.

'Alas, son of Haran, your sin lies between us, and who is there that could wipe it out?'

'There is no one who could wipe it out,' Lot again admitted, like an echo. He bowed down to the ground before his uncle and departed slowly, bent like a man weighed down by an excessive burden. Ab-Raham gazed after him. His heart all but bled with pity. In his yearning, he cried out in spirit:

'Lord! Send that One who shall take away the sins of the world!'

Son of the Promise

THE RAIN HAD BEEN DRUMMING ALL DAY ON THE GOATSKIN TENTS: IT stopped as the wind died away, in the early evening, but the cold of the winter season continued to penetrate inside. The feeble flame of an oil-lamp flickered in the draught, all but died out, then rose erect again and swayed as though dodging a blow. Late in the night Sarah sat up anxiously on her couch and caught at the hand of her old fostermother, who was sleeping beside her.

'What do you want, my dove?' Noa muttered, only half awake.

'Arise, Noa! Arise, for something stirred in my womb.'

'Are you feeling ill?' Noa brought the lamp closer, shielding the flame. She saw Sarah's changed face and dilated eyes, and was really alarmed.

'Are you feeling ill?' she repeated. 'I'll blow up the fire and heat some wine. . .

'I'm not feeling ill,' Sarah whispered feverishly. 'Something is stirring in my belly. . . . Tell me, Noa, what does a woman feel when she is with child?'

Now the old fostermother felt quite sure that Sarah was delirious. 'Have mercy, ye gods, and Thou God of Ab-Raham!' How could it have happened? The heat often affects the brain in the summer season; but in the winter? It must be magic.

'Go to sleep, Sarah,' she said as though talking to a child. 'Go to sleep; I'll tell you in the morning.'

'I shall not sleep; go and fetch Jokshah.'

'What do you want to see Jokshah for?'

'For her to find out, for her to tell me what is happening to me.'

'I shall not send for Jokshah,' Noa replied firmly, even angrily. 'Everybody would laugh at you. Why, your womanly parts have long since withered within you. Sleep!'

'Then we will go as soon as dawn comes.'

'Good, good! We'll go where you like, but now sleep.'

Noa turned away and went off to sleep, or, at least, pretended to. Sarah lay on her back, watchful and sober. She waited anxiously to see whether that strange, mysterious quivering, a movement she had never known before, would be repeated. Perhaps it really was only imagination, a drowsy delusion. She waited a long time. The flame flickered; within her and around her all was still. So it was imagination after all? But the blow she was awaiting was repeated more strongly, more definitely than before, and after a moment it came again, and yet again. . . . Was it perhaps a demon? She could easily have taken one down when drinking water, or could have swallowed him in a gust of wind. But perhaps . . . ? She could not wait till the morning. As soon as the cloudy, wintry dawn began to glimmer she rose, dressing herself so swiftly that Noa could not keep pace with her. But in any case Noa preferred that they should go to Jokshah early, while all the camp was still asleep. No one would see them, and there would be less laughter at their mistress's sudden mania. She looked at Sarah anxiously, at her face turning red and pale in turn. It was magic, obviously it was magic.

The stout midwife was still asleep. At Noa's call she looked out of her tent, dishevelled and astonished. Without waiting Sarah went inside. Jokshah's husband, the shepherd Abiram, angry and embarrassed, slipped out of his wife's couch and went to the other, male half of the tent. Noa hunched her head between her shoulders. She was terribly ashamed of Sarah's behaviour. But Sarah took no heed of anything now. She slipped off her robe swiftly, saying:

'Tell me, you who bring out the fruit from the womb, what is stirring within me?'

Jokshah looked at Noa. Noa turned her head away. Standing there naked, the old woman that was Sarah insisted:

'At once! Hurry! I want to know.'

Jokshah began to examine the barren woman. She worked carefully, she worked for a long time. She did not trust her own knowledge. She began again from the beginning. At last, unable to conceal her astonishment, she said:

'You have a child in your womb, Sarah. You will give birth to it in four months' time.'

'You're telling the truth? You're sure?'

'By the god of your husband Ab-Raham, I have told the truth. You are with child, Sarah.'

Noa and Sarah returned to their own tent. Sarah was changed. Her walk was youthful, her shoulders were thrown back, her eyes were sparkling. Noa walked as though stunned, not daring to speak. Ab-Raham was waiting for them, amazed that they had gone out so early. Ketura had already lighted the fire and was heating milk, for the morning was chilly.

Unconcerned who should see, Sarah tell at her husband's feet.

'My lord!' she began to sob. 'I am with child, in the fifth month.'

In her stupefaction Ketura dropped the pot of milk on the ground. Osa (Sur's younger brother, who had taken his place as Ab-Raham's personal servant) thrust his fist into his mouth and ran out of the tent, afraid of bursting into laughter. Eliezer hung his head with shame. A woman who could easily have been a great-grandmother, vaunting an imagined pregnancy, seemed to him somewhat unseemly.

Only Ab-Raham betrayed no surprise. He raised his wife and fervently pressed her to his breast. Tears rolled down his beard.

'Did not the Lord say you would give birth to a son? And you laughed, woman; you judged that I was drunk. . . .'

. 'Great, very great, is thy God, Ab-Raham. .

Hagar could not believe her ears. At first she laughed at Jokshah's credulity; then she told everybody that Sarah was carrying a demon, who would emerge through her nostrils; and at last, when the pregnancy of this barren woman was obvious to all eyes, she was silent, suppressing her envy and anger within her. She regarded the unexpected news as a personal injury. If Sarah should give birth to a son, that child would grow more dear to Ab-Raham than the son of his concubine. Hagar fully realised that Ab-Raham and Ishmael were not on terms of close intimacy. Truly, hitherto she had done nothing to have it otherwise, for she felt no threat to her own position. So long as Ishmael was Ab-Raham's only heir nothing could deprive her son of his estate. Now she tried to compel the lad to show affection for his father. But it was useless, for the lad could not endure being compelled to anything, and he did only as he wished. Hagar's former hatred for Sarah was revived in all its old violence. She cursed her in spirit, she wished that in her pregnancy she would fall on a stony road, would be frightened by a bull, or bitten by a snake. She was

reduced to frenzy as she saw the profound respect with which the wife of the chief was surrounded. No one had troubled themselves like that over Hagar's condition before the birth of Ishmael. Truly, Ab-Raham had been infatuated with her and had been deeply concerned for her; but no one else liked the Egyptian woman. Yet now, as Sarah went past the men stopped to look benevolently at her changed figure, the women came out from their tents and called: 'Blessed art thou among women, Sarah! Blessed be the fruit of thy womb!' Sarah nodded in answer, blushing, confused, inexpressibly happy. As Hagar watched she ground her teeth.

To plague her rival, she hypocritically expressed pity for her, prophesying that she would not survive the travail. She reminded everybody how much a young woman suffers when bearing her first child, even though her bones are pliant and her body resilient and supple. So what would a grey-haired old woman feel like? She contrived to pass this anxiety on to Sarah, but only for a brief moment, for Ab-Raham put an end to it by laughing indulgently.

'Fear not, woman,' he assured her. 'The Lord who has opened your barren womb will be able to bring the child into the world.'

'Right and just are your words, my lord,' Sarah admitted, regaining her tranquillity.

'They will never rear it,' Hagar declared with relief, when she saw the small and thin newly born infant. Despite her expectations Sarah's labour had been swift and easy, in all probability because the child was so small. Hagar exulted, recalling till her listeners were bored how beautiful, fat, and heavy Ishmael had been from the very beginning. Now that was a son! Sarah paid no heed to her, for she was absorbed in her happiness; but Resa and Noa grew impatient and drove the Egyptian woman out of the tent. Secretly they were surprised that Hagar had been allowed to see the child. 'She doesn't wish the mife any good, oh no!' Noa muttered with dislike in her tone. But they knew Ab-Raham himself had given the bondswoman permission. He had no illusions as to Hagar's feelings, but he wished to show that no evil could happen to this miraculously born infant.

The child was called Isaac, 'Bringer of Joy', and also the 'Laugh', because his mother had laughed at the promise of his birth. On the eighth day, regardless of his wife's tears and fears, Ab-Raham circumcised the

infant. He handled the little body as though it were sacred, the obvious gift of God.

Though small and feeble, Isaac did not ail. He had a milk-white complexion, blue eyes, and flaxen hair, but he combined both his father's and his mother's features, and it was as though their swarthy beauty had been transmuted into golden light within him. Passive and a little pathetic, he was well suited to be the object of the love and adoration of his parents, Noa, Eliezer, Ketura, and all the tribe. When Noa carried him, with as much reverence as if she were nursing a little divinity wrapped in a coloured swaddling band, he looked about him with mild, rather astonished eyes. He early began to smile, and Sarah greeted his first innocent smile with tears of happiness. When she took her breast filled with young milk into her furrowed hand she wept again. 'Who would ever have believed that I would feed my own son?' she confided to Noa. 'Who would have told Ab-Raham that Sarah would feed his son with her own breasts?' Every rite connected with the child - bathing it, swaddling it, putting it to sleep - became a joyous, sacred ceremony. How empty and sad life had been before he came! Sarah measured her present happiness by all her long years of misery. She knew whom she had to thank for her happiness, and she overflowed with quiet adoration. Often, as she rocked the child she thought that no matter what Ab-Raham felt towards his God, he did not love Him as she did. Ab-Raham, the man, talked with his Lord, received commands from Him. Sarah did not expect and did not desire the Lord to speak directly to her. She would have died of fright. She only adored and loved Him in all humility. What can any man know of the feeling of the mother to whom God had given a child? Of her gratitude to the Incomprehensible who had looked down on the lowliness of His hand-maiden, and had filled two old people's empty tent with the joy of spring?

The mother and nurse shivered with anxiety over their treasure, feared lest it should catch cold, lest it should be in a draught, lest a spider should bite it, lest the sun should scorch it, lest the waning moon should shine on it, lest an owl should see it. Ab-Raham laughed at their fears. 'Not one hair will fall from his head,' he assured them. 'The hand of the Lord is over him.'

Despite Sarah's protests he readily called Ishmael to come and see the child. He wanted the two boys to be friends in the future, and to live as

brothers. The trusting Isaac welcomed the black-haired youth with a laugh; Ishmael took him forcibly and awkwardly in his arms; Sarah cried out in her fear that he would drop the child. Noa grumbled. The young wolf looked about him uncertainly, put down the precious burden as soon as he could, and slipped out of the tent. For the moment Ab-Raham's endeavours were not crowned with success.

From these days of happiness, from the rush cradle hung on strings from the tent crosspole, Ab-Raham was summoned by the messenger from the king of Gerar. 'With sorrow my soul has heard,' Abimelech announced, 'that you have yielded to another the well which I gave you. I am told that Jeser the Hivite has caused you much trouble. Why did you not report it to me? Why did you yield to the Hivite? He is no longer living in this district. Come, for I desire to give you again the well into our possession.'

'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good tidings of peace,' Ab-Raham replied through the messenger, and pondered what he should do. He had no intention now of leaving the oak grove of Mamre, the blessed spot in which he had received the best things in his life. Yet he decided that he must journey to the king, so that in the future his sons should not be forbidden their right to the well which their forefather had dug.

Abimelech received Ab-Raham with great respect, for rumours had already reached him that it was the god of the Hebrew who had rained fire from heaven on the cities in the Valley of Siddim, which was now a lake. 'All the world had heard the report of this calamity, and it was this news that had decided him to send the messenger. For, to tell the truth, he had known for many years that the Hebrews had left their former pasturage, and had gone to dwell below Hebron.

'Your god is with you in all you do,' he declared to Ab-Raham. 'I will give you as an everlasting heritage the pasture by the well, where Jeser the Hivite grazed his flocks. But first make with me a covenant, swearing by your god that you will not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son, and that you will do no harm to the land wherein you have sojourned.'

Ab-Raham said: 'I will swear'. He sent Osa back to the camp, to bring several heifers, sheep, lambs, and goats. As on that memorable day when he had made the Covenant with the Lord, his God, so now Ab-Raham

divided three beasts into halves, and killed two birds, and laid them all on either side of a narrow track, towards each other. First Abimelech, then Ab-Raham passed between the carcasses, to signify that they would never have disputes with each other, but would remain as one blood, one body, and one man. When the covenant was concluded, Abimelech looked at the little flock of beautiful sheep, all in lamb, which Osa was guarding some way off, and asked Ab-Raham what he had set them there for.

'Those seven ewe lambs,' said Ab-Raham, 'you shall take from my hand, that they may be a witness unto me that my forefather dug this well. For from you I received the pasturage, but the well which was their price, is mine.'

'You yourself departed from it,' the king observed, a little put out, 'nor did you complain to me about the Hivite.'

'Does the forest ass bray when he has food? I went whither I was welcomed with joy. I could not complain about the Hivite, for our dispute was decided by casting lots. I yielded my right to the well to no one. Shake not the nest of the eagle, though he flies far for his food.'

The king was dissatisfied, for Ab-Raham's reminder of what was the true situation had diminished the value of his gift, and with it the gratitude of the recipient.

'Who fears the frost will be troubled with snow,' he observed. 'I say to you again that you should not have yielded to the Hivite. As from this day you are my brother. I accept those seven ewe lambs from you in token that the well was yours.'

Osa drove up the lambs, and both men raised their right hand as they swore the oath. And from that time the well was known as Beersheba, or the Well of the Covenant.

As he returned from Beersheba Ab-Raham smiled in his beard. He now possessed not only the well, to which his right had been hitherto more a claim than a fact of possession, but a spacious expanse of pasturage, which he could pass down to his sons and his sons' sons from generation to generation. Until recently a nomad shepherd, never weary of a settled life, but, on the contrary, valuing above all the freedom with which he could graze his herd today here, tomorrow elsewhere, he felt that he had grown attached to the land in which the Lord had shown him so much favour. He desired to be bound with it in indissoluble bonds. And now one knot was tied: the well, a living spring, assuring that which

is the basis of life. Surely that was sufficient. But it was not, for at times shepherds abandon even a well, and sometimes water slips away through a cleft in the rock, leaving only a dry well-frame. Then what can a man have of permanence, unchanging, which his grandsons and great grandsons will never forget, but will return always to the land of their forefather? A grave, the place in which a man in the fullness of his days shall lay his bones – that is such a possession and final heritage. So long as he lives, every man willy-nilly remains a wanderer. Even if his own will does not drive him, yet he is driven by accident, by war, by events, by anxieties for his possessions. Only when he dies does he become permanently settled, attached to a spot which he will never again abandon.

Ab-Raham began to ponder over his future burying-place. In a field not far from the oak grove of Mamre, Ephron the Hittite, son of Zohar, possessed a cave unusually dry and deep, and very suitable as a burying-place for many generations. The cave was known as Machpelah. He decided that at the first opportunity he would ask the Hittite to sell him the cave and the field about it. He would pay as much as Ephron son of Zohar asked. In this land which the Lord had promised to his seed, he would be satisfied with the possession of two things; a well, and a burying-place.

He rode his ass impatiently back to the camp, for he longed to be home again. Sarah ran out to meet him.

'My lord, Isaac has cut his first tooth,' she whispered to him, as though entrusting him with a great secret.

Hagar in the Wilderness

ISAAC WAS FOUR YEARS OLD, ISHMAEL FIFTEEN. THEY REMAINED AS DIFFERENT from each other as fire and water. Ishmael was black and lusty, Isaac was small, and fair. In dexterity and courage Ishmael surpassed all the other boys in the camp. Isaac was timorous. He was of those bashful natures who would rather live in solitude than amid tumult. Taciturn, he unfolded only in the quietness of the tent, among his parents, whom he loved deeply, and with Efezer, Noa, and Ketura. Only in these surroundings did he grow talkative, and charming. Sarah, who worshipped her son, sometimes regretted that he was not more manly, and equal to Ishmael; but Ab-Raham silenced these regrets in his own fashion. The Lord who had given him had fashioned him according to His own will, he said. He himself did not complain that his beloved son would never surpass his half-brother in shooting from a bow or in using the sling. For, though Isaac was bashful and delicate, none the less he was Ab-Raham's son in every inch of him. As often as the father looked at the child's serious, wide-open eyes, he thought he saw a field prepared for sowing, into which he would scatter the seed of his own experience. Thus the dreams of a lifetime, of a son who would be his friend, a son who would be his confidant, were fulfilled. He would put his arm round his son, and ask him: 'Do you know, Isaac, who created the heaven, the earth, the sun, the stars, and you, and me?' The child would raise to him eyes as clear as a stream, as blue as the sky. 'No, father, I don't. Tell me all about it.' And, gently rocking Isaac in his arms, he would whisper to him, telling him about the Lord. Returning from a ride to see to the flocks and herds, he would press the small, warm body to his breast, carefully shielding his son against the chill of the night, and would reply considerably and simply to dozens of unexpected questions. Little by little the questions would grow fewer, would come to an end, and Isaac was silent. The boy's head would lean

helplessly against his father's breast, and he would sleep, like a fledgling in a nest. Then Ab-Raham would lift up his heart and soul, thanking the Lord for what He had given. Sarah would be waiting outside the tent, straining her eyes into the dusk, impatient and wrought up. And as Ab-Raham dismounted carefully from the ass, trying not to disturb the boy, Sarah would pour out her complaints. Truly, her lord was imprudent! The child was being bounced about on an ass at night, when he ought to be asleep in his couch. After 'all, Isaac was not yet seven. He belonged to her. When his seventh year was past Ab-Raham could do as he wished with him, could even send him out to guard the camels all night. . . . But for the time being Isaac was hers."

Usually the torrent of words poured past Ab-Raham's ears. He would stand lost in thought, holding the sleeping child in his arms, and gazing attentively into his little face. Not for the first time, he was struck by Isaac's resemblance to someone. . . . But to whom? He could not say. More than to his father and mother, Isaac was like . . . Certainly like no one in the tribe. All the sons of Eber were tall and dark. Then to whom? In vain Ab-Raham searched his memory, recalling various people he had seen during his lifetime. He could not recall who it was that Isaac resembled as Segub resembled his twin brother Zammoh.

There were times when Ab-Raham would let his thoughts wander far into the future. He tried to imagine Isaac's youth, and then the years of his maturity. Would his father live to see those days? That was hardly to be expected; yet Ab-Raham longed that it might be so; he greatly desired to see his beloved son building his own nest, taking the wife his parents would choose for him. And, although he smiled indulgently at these premature dreams, it was pleasant to imagine himself seeking a daughter-in-law. Truly he would not take her from any of those coastal cities where red-haired and lustful women, like Edith, were born, nor from the Canaanite tribes who worshipped cruel, evil gods. Then whence? Of course, from his own blood, from the seed of his elder brother. Nahor son of Terah had sons, he would have grandsons and grand-daughters. Ab-Raham decided that when Isaac was old enough they would both go on a journey to Harran. How Nahor would be astonished, knowing nothing of Isaac! Then the two brothers would make all the necessary arrangements, and Nahor would keep the most beautiful daughter of one of his sons for Isaac.

The only shadow over Ab-Raham's happiness during those days was cast by Hagar's passionate nature. The Egyptian woman was frantically jealous of the love he showed for Isaac. She would not admit that heart calls to heart and feeling responds to mutual feeling. Isaac worshipped his father above all other men; he was never so happy as when with him. Ishmael was bored in his father's company, and went to him only when he wanted something. As the boys grew, so their mutual alienation also grew. Ab-Raham, just by nature, was deeply concerned as he noticed this, and tried to compensate for his lack of love by being very generous to his elder son. When he gave Isaac a fine ass, which Eliezer had chosen as the wisest and most placid in the drove, he offered Ishmael a young camel. 'You will harness him and feed him yourself, so that he knows your voice,' he told his son. 'And in eighteen months' time, when you have trained him, you will be able to ride him wherever you wish. He is a swift, racing camel; his mother came from Egypt. . . .'

'Like mine!' the strange boy broke into a laugh, and in his delight he quite forgot to thank his father for the gift. So far as the two boys were concerned, if Hagar had not been there to talk to her son, inspiring him with imaginary wrongs, they would have come to closer understanding as time passed. Isaac greatly admired his big, dexterous brother, regarded him as an example too high to be imitated, and gladly followed him about. He was not repelled by his half-brother's sneers and malevolent tricks.

But neither Isaac's gentle nature nor Ab-Raham's just treatment disarmed the hatred Hagar felt for Sarah and her son. A demon of envy had taken possession of her. She began to lose control of her temper. Though secretive by nature, she could no longer conceal her feelings. Whenever she passed Isaac her eyes flashed lightning. 'She'll poison the child some day, or else bewitch him,' Sarah said fearfully. 'But my lord, Ab-Raham, cannot see it.'

Noa agreed. 'Hagar must be a *kasappu*, a witch,' she declared.

'But I once called her a witch to her face, and she did not flee.'

'The moment must have been unfavorable, when her power was concealed. . . .'

'You're a witch! You're a witch!' Sarah called after the Egyptian woman. Hagar turned on her in a frenzy: .

'I'm not a witch; but I'll see to it that you drop down dead, you and your sickly whelp.'

When these threats came to Ab-Raham's ears he realised that it was time he talked to Hagar and tried to bring her to see reason. He had felt for a long time that he ought to do so, but he had procrastinated with the unpleasant task. For many years he had not spent any time alone with Hagar. If she had not been Ishmael's mother Ab-Raham would long since have put her out of his sight, to rid himself of the oppressive, unwelcome memory.

The summer was fiery, as it had been five years before, in the year of the Covenant, the Visitation of the Lord, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sarah called to Isaac, who was playing with Sur's children, to come and sleep in the tent during the afternoon hours. In such broiling heat the brain could easily be affected. Throwing off the drowsiness that was possessing him also, Ab-Raham chose that moment for the talk with Hagar.

When he entered the bondwoman's tent she was taken aback, and gazed at him anxiously, as though expecting a blow. But he went calmly to the couch, to sit down for the talk. The interior of this tent, which he had known so well in days past, no longer quickened any memories. His beard was milk-white, and he was old. When Hagar, still possessing a beauty unspoiled by labour, knelt down before him, setting her hands on his knees, he told her to sit quickly opposite him and listen quietly to what he had to say.

She sighed and obeyed, and he began to speak. He asked why her heart was bitter, and why her spittle had the venom of a serpent. (Hagar started in alarm, but he did not notice.) Was she so surprised that he loved the son who had been born so miraculously to him? Of a truth, he would be a monster and unworthy of his Lord's favour if he loved him less. No wrong was being done to Ishmael. 'Half of my flocks and herds and other possessions will belong to him,' he declared. 'But he will not be the head of the tribe. That is Isaac's portion. . . .'

'Ishmael is the older,' she snarled. 'Is that what you call justice, Rameh?'

'Call me by the name all call me, woman. My ears are closed to the name you give me. You, too, must forget it. To do justice is to deal with each according to his measure and according to his needs and according to his usefulness. Ishmael is not suited to be either a judge or a leader of shepherds. The Lord Most High has made a covenant with the Hebrew tribe. Therefore the chief of the tribe must be a priest bound diligently to fulfil the will of the Lord, to hearken to His voice. Examine your own

heart, and then say whether Ishmael would be able to do that. He is my son and yours, he will be a man of valour, maybe a great warrior; he may conquer cities. But he will not be a shepherd or a priest.'

She smiled, pleased with his praise of Ishmael; but she did not lose her feeling of injury.

'Heavy is my offence!' she began. 'You raised me out of the dust, and when you had satisfied your desire you threw me away as one throws away a clay shard or a broken armlet. You were my Rameh, and I have kept my thought of you as such; and now you want to deprive me of that last thing I have in common with you. You have slept on my bosom, you have caressed my thighs, there was no sweeter honey than the lips of your servant. You confided to my ear that you had never been so happy. . . .'

'Truly I slept on your bosom, I satiated myself with the touch of your thighs, with the sweetness of your lips, Hagar. I whispered words of happiness into your ears. Though I were to live another hundred years, still my days would not suffice to express all my regret that I ever did so. I would cut my life with you out of my memory like an ulcer, I would burn out that memory from my body with fire. . . .'

She had not expected such words. She burst into tears of sincere grief.

'Why?' she stammered through her tears. 'Why?'

'Because, woman, I gave you lordship over my soul. And by so doing I offended the Lord, to whom every living soul belongs. It is that I regret, Hagar. Not because I slept on your bosom; for that is a human thing; but because I gave you lordship over my soul. . . .'

'Everything has been taken from me,' she sobbed.

'The one who tries to possess too much has much to lose. I do not censure you, Hagar, only myself. Not you would I wish to cut out of my memory, but that to which I yielded. I do not censure you, though you lied. Lying is monstrous. Yet I forgave you, again reproving myself because I had not foreseen that you might behave so. For you do not yet know the Lord. . . .'

'And I don't want to know him!' she cried with sudden passion. 'I don't want to! I hate your god. He peers into human concerns like a spy, he examines the heart, the kidneys; he hears everything; there is no shelter from him anywhere. That is not what my soul desires. The Egyptian and Chaldean gods do not emerge from their temples. People go to them with offerings, and themselves tell the gods what they want. . . .'

'Truly, very great gods, well able to govern the world! Bold your

peace, Hagar. Do not challenge the Lord. The one who wrongs or offends another man may perhaps be forgiven by that other. But the one who offends the Lord - who shall intercede for him?

'I don't want your god,' she repeated through her tears.

'Want Him or not, you belong to Him. He hears you, woman, and sees you. He knew what you were doing at dawn this morning. . . .'

'She jumped up in terror.

'I did nothing,' she hotly declared.

' . . . And He knows what you will be doing this evening. Before you undertake any design, He knows it. To what purpose can you resist? Humble yourself.'

'I shall never humble myself,' she said thickly. 'If he has enemies, I shall ally myself with them. . . . I will do it out of spite. Spite for him and you.'

He nodded, filled with pity for her frenzy.

'The father,' he said, 'chastises his son that the child may grow in wisdom. Beware lest you are chastened! Think well over my words, Hagar. I shall divide my possessions equally between my sons and, of a truth, not every king thus endows his offspring. But do not expect your son to become my successor over the tribe. That is Isaac's portion. . . .'

'You will not change that decision?' she asked with an evil smile in her eyes.

'I shall not!'

'Ah well!' she whispered enigmatically.

Even as she spoke they heard Sarah shrieking outside the tent: 'Ab-Raham! Ab-Raham!'

He rushed to the entrance. Hagar threw herself on her knees before him, and would her arms round his legs.

'Let me go!' he shouted angrily. 'Something evil must have happened, for Sarah to cry out so loud.'

'What could have happened, my lord? And whom to? Isaac? But your mighty god will protect your son, not a hair will fall from his head! What are you in such a hurry for?'

He thrust her away, ignoring her sneers, and ran out. Sarah was standing outside their tent, her face as white as linen. Without a word she showed Ab-Raham a little dead snake, the colour of sand, lying at her feet.

'I found it in Isaac's couch,' she explained, gulping her breath. 'I snatched it up and crushed it with my foot.'

Ab-Raham went as pale as his wife.

'In Isaac's couch?' he repeated. He rubbed his forehead with an aberrant movement. 'In Isaac's couch?' Suddenly he cried out in alarm: 'Where is the child?'

'He was asleep. When I cried out he woke up.'

The boy was sitting up on his couch in the tent, smiling. He gazed at his parents in astonishment. Ab-Raham ran to him, took him into his arms, and nestled him to his breast. The old man trembled. A poisonous snake, an *esef*, had crawled into the touch of the light of his life. His little son might never have awakened again. He might have gone blue and stiff in his father's arms, as old Terah had gone blue and stiff. By sunset Isaac might have been no longer in the land of the living. But for the Lord's care . . . He raised all his heart to heaven in gratitude.

'Blessed be thou, woman,' he whispered. 'You are brave, my Sarah. No many men would have dared to seize a snake in their hands and crush it with their feet.'

'I thought of Isaac, my lord, and I had no fear. . . .

They both wept. Alarmed by their tears, the child caressed them. Suddenly Sarah drew herself away. Her eyes flashed, she raised her hand and cried:

'Cursed be the hand that put the snake there!'

'The hand that put the snake there?' Ab-Raham repeated incredulously. 'Woman, the snake must have crawled there. No one in the city of Harran brought in the snake that cut short the days of Terah son of Nahor. . . .'

'Deaf are your ears, blind are your eyes, Ab-Raham!' she cried angrily. 'In the hill city of Harran there were snakes in plenty. But there are no snakes here. . . . Have you ever seen one snake all the time we have journeyed in this spot?'

'Sarah your wife is right, my lord,' Eliezer intervened. He had been listening in silence to the conversation while turning over the boy's couch thoroughly. 'Either a demon or some evil person brought that snake here,' he added firmly. 'A snake does not bring herbs with it. But here are herbs brought with the snake.'

'I knew it!' Sarah exclaimed.

They all looked at one another without speaking. The one name was on all their minds. Ab-Raham mentally went over his conversation with Hagar. As he recalled certain of her replies he saw them in a new light. She had betrayed herself several times over.

'So it was she,' he said firmly. 'Then she will do no more harm here.'

c He turned and strode back to Hagar's tent. She had already gathered that her plan had failed; though she strained her ears, she could catch no ~~tail of murmuring~~. Now she prepared to deny the charge. She regretted that Ishmael was not at hand to defend her, for undoubtedly Ab-Raham would beat her. But let him! She would not admit anything.

However, Ab-Raham had no intention even of questioning her, far less of beating her. His eyes were cold; his face was stony.

'You will go hence at once,' he said in a voice quivering with suppressed fury. 'You will depart, and your feet will never return to tread this spot. Sur will take you by camel to the city, where you will remain. If you ever attempt to return I shall kill you myself. . . . As my God liveth. I shall kill you at once. . . .'

c 'You're driving away me and my son? What for?'

'I am driving you away, as one drives a hyena away from the camp. What for? Your soul knows well enough. I was blind not to realise from your own words what you had done. Ishmael will remain. Ishmael is my son. I am driving you out. I shall keep Ishmael.'

'Do you desire my death?'

'Do not challenge death, for it is very near.'

He went out quickly, afraid he would be carried away by his anger. He called to Sur to saddle a camel. Hardly had he gone when Hagar rushed out of the tent as though insane and ran in the opposite direction, to look for Ishmael. She found her son in the oak grove, setting snares for birds. She seized him by the hand.

'Come, quickly! Come! Your father is driving us out. We must go away.'

'Where to? What for?' he asked, failing to understand.

'Into the world. We shall not remain here. Come!'

'Father told me today that I can begin to break in my camel.'

'So he said; but now Isaac has made a complaint about you, and we are being driven out. . . .'

'Isaac never makes any complaint. . . .'

'He did! He says you put a snake in his couch. . . .'

'But it was you who did it!' he exclaimed, laughing. 'I saw you bring it in this morning.'

'Hold your tongue!' She rushed at him and smacked him so hard on the cheek that for a moment he was dazed. It was the first time she had ever struck him, and in his amazement he submitted.

'Where are we going?' he asked as he collected his bow and arrows from the ground. He had come out for the whole day, so he had a pitcher of water and a barley cake with him.

'Straight in front of us; we shall not go back to the tent! Quicker! Come on! Come on!'

'Do you know the way?'

'No . . . I mean, yes, of course I know!' she lied, governed by the one idea of getting away before Ab-Râham noticed and detained her son. Her son! She would never give him up.

'What shall we eat and drink?' the boy asked practically.

'But you have bread and water.'

'We shall live a long time on that!'

'It will be sufficient. Hurry! What are you standing there for?'

'Mother, first go to the tent and get food, and a bag for water.'

She struck him again, with all her strength. More surprised than frightened, he gave way. She hurried so fast that he could barely keep pace with her.

'There's no track this way!' he exclaimed.

'We shall find it later.'

'What will happen if we do not get there by nightfall?'

'We shall spend the night in the wood.' . . .

He gave a long whistle. He was beginning to think it all rather an amusing adventure.

'Have you ever been here before?' he asked.

'Yes, of course,' she lied.

'What for?'

She shrugged her shoulders angrily. He did not insist on an answer. His cheeks were still burning. They went straight ahead in a westerly direction.

The pitcher had been emptied the evening before, Ishmael had just eaten the last crumbs of bread. The heat continued. Worse still, they had lost their return road, the only one of which they could have had knowledge. All the previous day they had gone on till dusk, and the next day again from dawn till noon, without coming upon either road, or water, or any trace of human being. They were completely lost. Ishmael, who was endowed with the hunter's instinct, would have remembered the road back to the camp, if Hagar's almost delirious vehemence had not driven him forward faster and faster, giving him no chance to look about him

or leave guiding marks. Now they were wandering amid interlacing chains of hills, which dropped down towards the distant sea. These rocky wildernesses were not traversed by any high road, and, owing to the absence of water, it was vain to hope to fall in with any herds. Mother and son dropped down into a valley, walking over sun-scorched grass intersected by the runnels of dried-up torrents. Remembering the 'shepherds' stories, Ishmael tried to dig small holes among the stones. Not the least drop of moisture gathered at the bottom. On the farther side of the valley more hills rose, just as steep and bare; and when they struggled to the top they saw before them line upon line of similar hills and valleys, all equally burnt by the sun, all equally desolate. The boy was hungry, thirsty, and furious; Hagar was barely alive. Her throat was parched; black and crimson spots danced before her eyes. At last she could go no farther, and she sat down under a bush; it was leafless, withered by the sun.

'Ishmael,' she whispered, 'leave me. Go back to your father. Your father did not drive you out. . . .'

'You should have said that yesterday,' he barked at her. 'How can I return when we have lost our way? You have brought me here to die. . . .'

She could not bear to listen to his reproaches, and she stopped her ears. He walked away a few paces and lay down on the ground, his back turned to her. She wept, and licked her tears; they were salt and hot. Exhausted, she, too, lay down. How unjust her son's words were! She had led him out here to die? She wanted to talk to him, to assure him that she loved no one else but him in all the world, that he was her happiness, her light and her love. She called feebly: 'Ishmael!' He did not stir, he did not answer. He was very angry; but she imagined he was dying, and she was seized with boundless despair. 'You have brought me here to die!' And wasn't it true? She had intended simply to spite Ab-Raham, but now Ishmael would die. She had driven him on with beatings as if he were a refractory ass, away from the shady oak grove, away from sufficiency, away from a wealthy father, for him to wither here like grass. Her Ishmael, her handsome, brave son! 'Woe on my head! Woe! For I have brought him here to die.'

Now for the first time she had some feeling of responsibility for her shifty conduct, for her lies born of the most trifling causes, for her outbreaks of frenzy, which had now brought her to being the cause of her own son's death. She tried to thrust away this gleam of conscience as

being too cruel, for all her life she had been accustomed to thinking of herself as the victim of others. 'Everybody has injured me, even my son,' she whispered. But when the voice she had now aroused asked insistently: 'Name anyone who has done you any injury,' she was silent, for she had no answer.

She went again to her son, who was lying motionless. His lips were dry, splitting. She sat down some distance off and tore her hair. She scratched her face. She flung herself on the ground and scrambled in it as though seeking moisture. She muttered to herself: 'Heavy on me is the hand of the god of Ab-Raham. He is as sudden as lightning. Hardly had I challenged him when he struck me down. . . . He is without mercy. . . . Have mercy on my sufferings, give me water for Ishmael. Send water. . . .'

She raised the small pitcher into the air, turned it bottom upward as if to show that it was empty, and groaned. Then she dragged herself on her knees once more to the boy, to ask his forgiveness, to weep over him. He thrust her away without a word. She returned to the foot of the bush where she had been lying and cursed herself, the sun, the earth. She repeated: 'My head is dried up with the drought, Ishmael's tongue has cloven to the roof of his mouth. I carried my son in my womb, and now he is drying up in my sight like grass without dew. I wished that others might die, but the one I love is dying. I wished that Sarah might weep over her son, but now I am weeping over mine. Who has thus entangled my designs! Come, and see that thou hast punished me as sufficeth. Thou hast made me one with my pain. Water, water, I pray thee, Lord God of Ab-Raham. Terrible is thy power. . . . Terrible is thine anger. . . . Because of my pride thou hast caught me like a lioness in a snare. . . . The stone melted with the heat is turning to copper. . . . My cheeks are of copper. . . . Thou hast destroyed me, . . . trodden me underfoot. . . . Thou hast elevated Thyself like a stone over me. . . . The flies are buzzing round my head. . . . They do not thirst, though they see no water. . . . The vulture hangs high on its wings in the heaven. . . . It will drink my blood and the blood of my son. . . . The sky will be cool with the evening, but Ishmael will not feel the dew. . . . The sun has yet a long road to travel, and my son's strength has ebbed from him. . . . I melt in the fire like wax, I have dissipated like smoke. . . .'

'Like smoke. . . .' she repeated; and darkness came upon her.

She came round only many hours later, when the evening cool was refreshing the earth. Ishmael, strong and content, was standing over her, sprinkling her face with water from the pitcher. She thought at first that she was dreaming, then that she was seeing a spirit. Unable to believe her eyes, she wept and kissed his feet. He pushed her away, smiling, and, having given her to drink, thrust a piece of raw, steaming meat under her nose: 'Eat!'

She did not glance at the meat, she gazed at him. She still thought she was seeing things in her sleep. He sat down beside her, and with youthful braggadocio began to tell how he had found water and meat. He had had no intention whatever of dying, as his mother had thought. He only felt angry with her for having lied. And he had felt annoyed with himself for trusting a woman and going off like a fool into the wilderness. As he had lain in the afternoon sun he had been thinking what he could do to get out of this trap. Just before sunset he had seen two roeders passing a little way off, and then two more. They did not look as though they had been startled from somewhere, so he argued that they must be going down to a drinking place. He quietly crawled after them, wriggling under the bushes like a snake, until he came upon an animal track, well trodden. Now he had no doubt that it led to water. He returned for his pitcher and bow, then followed the trail again, until he found a tiny spring, almost invisible among moss. He drank his fill and replenished the vessel. He lurked in the bushes, and shot a young goat. He flayed it, cut it up, put the meat on a tree to keep it secure, ate as much as he wanted, then aroused his mother. 'Eat!' he commanded, thrusting the meat under her nose. She did not like refusing him, despite her abhorrence of raw meat; she gulped down a couple of pieces, gazing at her son with eyes of rapture. To her surprise she began to feel stronger, and, fighting her revulsion, she ate some more. Ishmael clapped her indulgently on the back.

'I like this sort of life,' he told her. 'Don't you like raw meat? I'll manage to light a fire, and you'll be able to cook it. I don't want to go back to father and the camp now. . . I shall become a hunter of wild beasts. . .'

He was deciding his own future like a man who does not even think to ask the woman her opinion. Hagur could not do otherwise than gaze at him humbly, and listen to him.

8

The Lion Hunter

AB-RAHAM WAS PLUNGED INTO DESPAIR WHEN HE FOUND THAT ISHMAEL had disappeared. He made every effort to find him. Every living man in the camp saddled an ass or a camel and set off in pursuit. All the roads and all the tracks were searched. His messengers travelled as far as the coastal cities, as far as the bounds of the Negeb, even to the shores of the Salt Lake and northward to the city of Shechem. They searched so diligently that one would have thought not even a field-mouse could have hidden from their eyes. They questioned everyone they met; but nobody had seen a slim, black-haired woman with eyes painted in the Egyptian fashion, and a swarthy youth. They were completely at a loss to know where the runaways had concealed themselves, and believed the hands of malevolent demons were responsible; for it did not occur to anyone, not even to Ab-raham, who knew Hagar's unbridled passion, that the frenzied woman had gone straight out into the lonely, trackless, sunburnt wilderness. Even a man plentifully supplied with food and water would hesitate before such an undertaking.

Downcast, depressed, Ab-raham reproached himself for not having foreseen what Hagar would do. After all, she had already fled into the wilderness once before, and that when she was pregnant. She should not have been left to herself for one moment. Still more bitterly did he charge himself with showing insufficient affection to Ishmael, and making no attempt to get to know him, nor succeeding in winning the boy's attachment. Unable to remain quietly in the camp, he also set out to search for the runaways. In the market-place at Hebron he saw a crowd of people surrounding a man whose face seemed familiar. He halted, dismounted from his ass (for he must not miss any opportunity of getting news) and joined the circle of listeners. The stout, well-dressed merchant was relating

details of the recent funeral of Ham^umurabi, son of Sin-M^uballit, lord of half the world.

"... The procession was drawn up in fours, and a careful check was made to ensure that no one was missing," he was saying. "The courtiers, the courtesans, the officials, their wives, their children, warriors, servants, slaves, both men and women... right down to the ass-drovers. So altogether there were more than 1,500 people. All magnificently attired, and content because they had been told they would form the funeral retinue of the favourite of the gods, conducting the dead ruler to his grave, and afterwards would sit down at a banquet already prepared in the palace. The priests went in front, singing. The remains of Hammurabi were carried seated on a golden throne. The Babylonian looked exactly as he had when alive, he seemed on the point of speaking. The procession passed into a long, narrow stone passage leading to the burial chamber. When they had all entered, the ass-drovers coming last, a heavy bronze gate which had been raised high above the passage was dropped, to close the underground chamber. Slaves at once rushed to roll stones already prepared, one on top of another, and to cement them together, so raising a stout wall which no power could shift. Earth was heaped over this wall until a mound was built up, and before long you would never have been able to tell where the entrance was. . . ."

"And the priests were left inside too?" someone asked.

"The priests! Hardly any time had passed when they appeared in the temple and offered up sacrifices. They said the dead favourite of Marduk had sent them there, conducting his servants miraculously through the walls. But who would believe such a story? They had previously prepared a secret passage, which none of the others knew. But the procession was left inside. . . . And you can imagine the joy of those who had been forced to surrender their places in it to others!"

The narrator laughed heartily, and suddenly Ab-Raham remembered who he was. Taking advantage of the interruption, he went up to him.

"Greetings, Sarug son of Ephraim. Don't you recognise me?"

"Greetings, whoever you are. . . . Your features, worthy sir, are not entirely unknown to me. . . . But come to the aid of my memory."

"I met you, Sarug, very many years ago, in the land of Negeb. You persuaded me to travel to Egypt. . . ."

"A new acquaintance is unturned bread, an old acquaintance is wine

that maketh glad the heart of man. You are Ab-Ram son of Terah. I remember now perfectly. . .

'It is true that I was then called Ab-Ram son of Terah. But now my name is Ab-Raham. . .'

'Ab-Raham?' the merchant exclaimed, genuinely astonished. 'You are Ab-Raham? By the gods! I have heard much about you. Do your servant this favour, come and drink wine with me in some retired inn. . . I will tell you curious things about yourself, which it is better not to publish abroad. . .

'Most willingly will I come with you, Sarug son of Ephraim,' Ab-Raham agreed, for it occurred to him that through the merchant he might learn news of Ishmael.

'In the market-place I was telling about the funeral of Hammurabi, son of Sin-Muballit,' Sarug began when they were seated in a shady wine-shop. 'To you I will confide something that happened not long before his death. He was ill a long time, and everybody knew he was going to his last home. Nor was that surprising, considering his age and his high on fifty years of rule. For others, rulership is a pleasure, to him it was a labour. He laboured constantly, receiving reports day and night, signing tablets, dictating commands. His secretaries were replaced in turn, no one replaced him. He never rested. He was as yellow as wax. He concealed his weakness to the end, until at last it threw him down on his couch, and as he lay everybody knew Hammurabi's days were numbered. As soon as the news leaked out the people made merry, for he had ruled with a hard hand; and his heirs, of whom there are several, began to quarrel and to win over partisans. Though the Babylonian was feeble, he still governed. From his couch he dictated to his secretaries the order of his funeral, the attire which the members of the retinue were to wear, the period of mourning, and the number of sacrifices.

'Then he asked the priests standing by his couch what would happen to him after he was dead. They replied: "Live for ever, O king! You will go to Marduk your father, who will set you in a star, like Nimrud, the founder of Babylon." To which he said: "Why do you say 'Live for ever!' when I am dying? Is there then life after death?" "You will shine as a star, favourite son of Marduk." And he said again: "Is that certain?" They answered: "Yes, that is certain." To which he said: "Let my father Marduk himself say so to me." But they: "A god never talks to anyone. That is why he has us priests to serve him. We hear his voice." The

Babylonian objected: "It is not as you say, for a report has reached me from the city of Ur that his god appeared to a man named Ab-Raham and foretold the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which followed soon after." To which a priest said: "We do not know whether this report is true and who this man Ab-Raham is and what god he confesses. Perhaps his god is a demon, and Marduk your father is much greater than he." Hammurabi would not yield, saying: "That other god is the stronger, for he breathes whenever he wishes, but Marduk can talk only through you. I want to know that god. Go and seek the man named Ab-Raham, let him show his god to me." The priests answered: "Live for ever, O king! We will bring you that man." And he said again: "Send everywhere, and hasten!" And they: "We will bring him though he were to conceal himself under the earth."

"They went out, as though to send messengers, but in reality they halted in the next room and shrugged their shoulders in their anger. They had no intention of sending anyone anywhere, knowing that before the shadow of the sun on the clock had shifted many lines the king would be dead. To appease the king meanwhile they brought the image of Marduk, all covered with gold leaf, from the temple, and set it before the couch, saying: "O king, behold your father." The king looked at it, his face changed, he set his hands together and asked: "Speak! Give me a sign!" In vain did he ask; the image did not speak. For had it ever spoken? The image stood gleaming with gold, and the king was moved with a great anger; he sat up on his couch and threatened the god with his fists, foaming at the mouth and shouting: "Clay, whom I made a god, speak! I covered thee with gold, I made thousands of sacrifices to thee, I gave thee a temple, and I met all thy needs. Canst thou not give me any hope? I want hope!" The priests again intervened: "O king, calm yourself; what do you desire?" "I want to know the Living God, the Living God who will hear my voice." And he tried to overthrow the image, but he lacked the strength.

"All this I learned from an acquaintance of mine, an official of the royal chamber, who was present at the time. Being an intelligent man, he realised that of all those who had heard those words not one would be left alive, just as no one would emerge alive from the funeral chamber. So he waited no longer; as soon as he had left the room he said a prayer for the king, slipped by stealth out of the palace, threw a plain cloak around his shoulders and departed from the city. He did not stop until he

reached Damascus, where I met him. He asked me not to publish this story to anyone, for, although the Babylonian is dead - the priests are still alive.

'I will repeat it to no one,' Ab-Raham assured him. He was deeply moved by the story, and felt sorry for the Babylonian and compassion for his death-bed terror. By comparison he felt that he himself was possessed of great wealth. 'At the hour of death,' he thought, 'I shall cry: "Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit." And I shall feel no fear. . . .'

'Now tell me, Ab-Raham,' Sarug began, when he had taken a drink of wine. 'Is it true as the Babylonian had heard, that your god spoke to you?'

'The true God to whom I belong, and not I alone, but every man together with all the world, speaks, I believe, to everyone who desires to know Him. Would you like me to tell you about Him?'

'Your servant will gladly listen some other day, for now I have very little time. Death does not yet stand over me as it did over Hammurabi, for me to fear it. I am in haste to journey to Babylon. All the merchants from the coastal cities are hastening there, and he who arrives first will make most. . . . I expect a good harvest. Hammurabi had accumulated great wealth in the country, and had burdened both imports and exports with taxation, so there was no trade. It was even hard to bribe the officials, since they were afraid for their skins. They believed the Babylonian knew everything. Now they will give themselves more rest. They will swiftly dissipate his patrimony, and his State too; I hear Elam is already raising its head. But before that happens the merchants will be able to do well for themselves.'

'It was a transient heritage Hammurabi left, though he exerted himself so greatly,' Ab-Raham remarked.

'Yes, transient indeed. Nothing in this world is enduring, except perhaps a well-conducted merchant's business. The people themselves are overthrowing the offices and murdering the inspectors. The only thing that will be left of Hammurabi are the tablets of the law, which he set up everywhere. They will be respected by everybody, for they are wise and useful. . . .'

'I want to ask you to do me a service, Sarug.'

'Speak, and with pleasure will I do what you ask.'

Ab-Raham told the merchant of Ishmael's disappearance. He did not

go into the details of the incident, but asked that if Sarug happened to fall in with the runaways he would take them into his protection and let Ab-Raham know.

'Rest assured that I shall do so, and not in the manner that the priests sought for you, but in very deed, not sparing the labour,' Sarug assured him with a smile.

Ab-Raham said goodbye to his old friend, and set out on the return journey. The fleeting hope that when he reached the camp he would hear news of Ishmael proved vain. All the messengers were already back, and not one had any news.

So there was no change in the situation. Ab-Raham did not know whether to proclaim a period of mourning, or to go on waiting. He fretted and aged. Until, rather less than two years after Hagar's flight, Ishmael himself came to the camp to visit his father. At first no one recognised him, for he had grown so much, and looked so manly. A cloud of black hair hung about his forehead, his skin was tanned a deep brown. He was naked, wearing only a leopard skin around his loins. The animal's tail hung down his right thigh, and a paw with claws down his left. He fell at Ab-Raham's feet, stroked the cheek of Isaac, who went wild with delight, pretended that he did not see Sarah, who was peering out of the tent, and nodded indifferently to the others. Ab-Raham could not contain his joy. He at once gave orders for a banquet to be prepared, meat to be baked and wine to be served. As the lad ate voraciously, between the bites he told his story. He was quite content with his present manner of life, and did not wish to exchange it for any other. He had settled his mother in the coastal city of Gaza, had gathered together several youngsters who shared his love of freedom, and went hunting after the great beasts of prey, lions, leopards, and bears. The leopard whose skin he wore around his loins had been his first big kill. Now he had visited his father to collect his mother's articles and to ask for a few things for himself.

'Take what you wish,' Ab-Raham said readily. 'Camels, asses, cattle. . .'

The hunter laughed till he threw himself back on the grass.

'You can keep your flocks and herds, father. What should I do with them? I do not want to be a drover or shepherd. I prefer to be the lord of animals, not their servant. Sheep are useful to me only as bait, and it would be a pity to use your fine sheep in that way. Give me, I ask you,

a dozen or so good bows, many arrows, javelins, and spears, and then you will rejoice my soul.'

'Take what you wish,' Ab-Raham repeated. 'You are my son, the son I lost and have found again. All I possess is yours. There is nothing I would refuse you.'

'Then do me one more favour, father: let my mother be no longer called your bondwoman.'

'As the Lord liveth, from this day forth Hagar is no longer a bonds slave. I swear by the name of the Lord Most High, that she is free and may do as she wishes. Take good care of her in her old age, remembering that whatever evil she did, she did from love of you. What more do you wish? Speak, and I will give.'

'I need nothing more,' the lad said, after a moment's thought. 'When I go with my comrades the shepherds give us milk, bread, and sheep meat. If I desired, they would give their wives and daughters, so glad are they because we defend them from the lions. I have found bees in the cleft of a cliff, and we take the honey from the comb. And in exchange for skins the merchants give us such clothes as we wish, and wine. . . . I need nothing.'

He shook his black curls proudly. Ab-Raham fixed his eyes on him, unable to conceal his admiration for the handsome, audacious youngster.

'I am old,' he said, 'and I know not when mine eyes will see you again. Ishmael, would you like me to bless you before you go?'

'Yes, my father, if it pleases you.'

He knelt down awkwardly. Ab-Raham rested his palms on the curly head and blessed him, asking for the protection of the Lord Most High over his son Ishmael and all his line, from generation to generation. 'May he be granted abundantly of the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth.'

When he ended, Ishmael jumped up at once. He was not wont to show his emotion, and concealed it under a feigned indifference.

'I have given orders for Hagar's raiment, her harp, and other things to be laden on two asses,' Ab-Raham said, when they sat down again. 'You can drive them before you.'

'Deign to send them, father, through Sur, or another servant, for I shall not see my mother earlier than the second full moon. They will easily find her. She dwells beside the eastern gate, with Neta the Egyptian.' He

laughed aloud, and added: 'She is already arranging for my betrothal to his daughter. . . .'

'Ab-Raham was disturbed. 'It is for me to find a wife for my son,' he said.

Ishmael snorted with laughter, as was his habit.

'Neither you, father, nor my mother will marry me off. I shall myself choose the wife I desire. . . .'

He wiped his mouth, and jumped up to go and select the weapons. He bound them together in a heavy bundle, and said goodbye to his father. At the news that his brother was going off again Isaac broke into such bitter tears that Ishmael was quite embarrassed.

'Don't bawl,' he muttered. 'I'll come again some day, and I'll bring you a little lion.'

'Won't he eat the lambs?' the boy asked anxiously.

'Tell him to eat only the old rams,' Ishmael jeered. He stroked the boy's flaxen head, more gently than he had intended, flashed his teeth in a farewell smile, and, throwing the bundle of weapons over his shoulder, went off with the elastic, gliding step of a man of the woods.

The Sacrifice

'HERE AM I!' AB-RAHAM SAID, AWAKENED OUT OF A DEEP SLEEP IN THE dead of night. 'Here am I!' he repeated, for he thought he heard someone calling him. But there was silence all about him, and the old man's heart began to beat anxiously at the thought that the Lord was speaking. It was long, very long, since he had last heard the Voice of the Lord. Seventeen years had passed since He had called His servant at night, by that well now called the Well of the Covenant. Now, as Ab-Raham strained his ears to listen in a silence so deep that it rang in the ears, he wondered anxiously what the Lord desired of him. He felt at peace with his conscience, and perfectly happy, and so to that terror which is natural to a mortal being, was added the human fear of change.

Hearing nothing, he thought he must have dreamed, and he dropped off again with a feeling of relief. But he was called a second time, loud and distinct: 'Ab-Raham! Ab-Raham!' Without doubt, it was the Lord. His voice filled the world and the human heart, which was as empty as a washed-up shell.

'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth,' Ab-Raham whispered fervently. . . . Suddenly he was seized with utter horror. No! No! He had not heard aright! He had not understood aright! That was not the Lord speaking to him. In his old age he had become the plaything of a demon. The Lord's voice, which hitherto had spoken to him so often in words of blessing, had commanded him firmly and brutally to sacrifice his own son to Him. He covered his ears with his hands, in vain, for the Voice was thundering within his breast and his brain. He cowered like a hunted animal, and groaned with fear. The Voice died away. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. He took courage in thinking of the obvious improbability of the command. The Lord would demand something so horrible

as that? The Lord merciful and righteous, of whom Melchizedek, king of Urû-Salem, had said that His mercy embraced all creatures?

The dawn came beautiful, vernal; the torment of the night now seemed imagination. Isaac ran joyously into his father's part of the tent, and Ab-Raham hugged the boy to himself as though he had been saved from some horrible fate. He ran his hand over the child's hair, as soft as down, and rejoiced that they were both alive. And that it had been only a terrible, incomprehensible dream. He recalled it with a shiver of fear. That night he took Isaac to sleep with him, much to Sarah's discontent. But in the night he was awakened by a repeated call, and the Voice reiterated the demand. 'No, Lord!' the tormented father gasped in spirit, 'Thou dost not demand that. . . . Thou canst not demand that I should kill my son Isaac who is sleeping on my breast. . . .'

'I demand that very son, your son Isaac, who is sleeping on thy breast. I desire thee to sacrifice him to Me.'

But again Ab-Raham told himself that it was a dream. The next night he went far out of the camp to sleep. He fled. Put there, too, the call overtook him: 'Thou swear'st by the fire, the earth, the air and water that thou wouldst obey Me in all I desired. With thine obedience thou didst desire to wipe away the guilt of thy forefather, Adam. . . . But today thou refusest Me. . . .'

'Lord, I will do all Thou commandest, save this one thing, which I will not do.'

'Is that thine obedience? The people willingly give their children to false gods; Aser sacrificed his own son to the oak; but thou refusest?'

'The false gods are cruel and evil, but Thou art righteous and merciful. Thou canst not demand this thing. . . . I would rather kill my own soul. . . .'

'I am the Lord of all that liveth, and whenever I wish I take as I think. When I take, I take mine own; when I deprive, I do not deprive another. . . . Sacrifice thy son Isaac to Me.'

'O, Lord! But it was Thou who gavest him to me!'

'So much the greater is My right. . . . He is Mine. Give him back to Me.'

'I will not resist Thee, Lord. I will do as Thou desirest.'

Early in the morning he returned to his tent, looking so old, tortured and pale that at the sight of him Sarah cried out in terror: 'Are you ill, Ab-Raham?' He made no answer, only halted a moment in the tent, then

turned back and passed through the oak grove, pondering continually how he could take the child and flee with him. But where could he flee from God? 'Though I had the wings of an eagle,' he reflected, 'I shall not escape him. If I take the wings of the morning, there will God's eyes find me. In His hands is the world. Where is the cleft or the wilderness or the hill so high that He who created me would not find me?'

When, that night, the Voice called him again, he answered:

'I will sacrifice my beloved son to Thee. I will sacrifice him immediately after the new moon.'

So he said; but in his spirit he was thinking: 'I will go this evening into the wilderness. Perhaps a lion will devour me, and I shall not be forced to kill my child.'

But the Voice of Him who reads all thoughts replied:

'Not when the new moon shines, but now, thou shalt journey to Moriah and offer him up on the mountain I will tell thee of.'

'I am journeying with Eliezer and my son Isaac to Moriah, to make a burnt offering to the Lord. So the Lord has commanded,' Ab-Raham told Sarah.

'But you are ill!' she replied angrily. 'You can hardly keep your feet. How can you go?'

'Perhaps I shall get well when I have fulfilled the will of the Lord.'

'Leave Isaac behind. He's still so small. What are you taking him for?'

'The Lord has commanded.'

'Where is Moriah?'

'Three days' journey.'

He ordered Eliezer to prepare everything they needed for the journey, not forgetting wood and a pot of embers. He himself lay helpless in his tent. Through the canvas partition he heard Isaac cry out with joy when his mother told him he was to go too. The boy had never yet been outside the camp, so his delight was great. He chattered incessantly, asking Eliezer where they were journeying to and which way they would go.

'Show me Thy mercy, Lord, and let me die,' Ab-Raham entreated. Heaven was silent. Gradually the old man's despair turned to anger. He cried out in spirit: 'Answer me! Thou didst call to me first. . . Thou didst seek me out and find me, not I Thee. . . Why art Thou taking the child Thou gavest me? Delightest Thou in human torment? Who will defend me against Thee?'

He raged until he recalled how Hagar had screamed: 'I shall ally myself with the enemies of His Name.' He had thought her mad then, but now he himself was ready to cry out similar words. He covered his head with his cloak, groaning: 'My God! My God! Have mercy upon me!'

'Here is the food for you, my lord, and for Eliezer,' said Sarah. 'And here is Isaac's separately. The cake he likes. Noa spent all night baking. It is good and fresh.'

'You've given too much; Isaac will not eat all that,' Ab-Raham remarked, for the sake of saying something. 'The journey will only last three days.'

'And three days back!' she exclaimed. He made no comment, and food was packed for Isaac's return journey.

'See that the boy doesn't drink water from the ponds, he might swallow a leech. Don't ride during the noontide, when it is hot. Take a good look through your couch for scorpions. . . . See that he doesn't get cold at night,' Sarah thought of instruction after instruction.

'Say goodbye to your son, woman,' Ab-Raham said huskily.

She glanced at him, astonished at the tone of his voice. Was he so changed through illness? Isaac ran into her arms. They kissed each other again and again. Once more, as he sat on the back of his favourite, wise old ass Isaac stretched out his arms to his mother and promised to be back soon. Ab-Raham listened and made no comment.

'Let my lady be reassured,' Eliezer said. 'He will not be scorched by the heat, nor will he be cold at night.'

They set out at last, Ab-Raham in front, alone with his thoughts, Eliezer and the boy behind. Delighted with the excursion the boy sang aloud, his head cocked on one side, like a bird.

The spring rains had fallen not meagrely that year, the sun was warm and the earth seemed beautiful to behold. The asses waded through flowers up to their bellies. Golden crowfoot, purple anemones, tulips, larkspur, poppies, nodded their heads beneath the swarms of butterflies fluttering round them. Over this carpeting of vivid colours Ab-Raham led his young son to his death.

The mountains called Moriah were among those *bamah*, or high places, on which sacrifices had been made to the gods all through the ages. The

gods changed, temples fell, the waves of the Flood washed over the surface of the earth; but the spots made sacred by memory and custom still continued in their strength, the silent sanctuaries of an unknown God. For these 'high places' isolated mountains were chosen, so that it was possible to go right round them, and to see them from all sides; there was always a spring on the slopes or at the foot.

When they reached the foot of the mountain Ab-Raham said to Eliezer: 'Remain here with the ass, and I and the lad will go up and worship and offer up a burnt offering.' 'What with?' Eliezer asked. But Ab-Raham did not reply. Apparently he did not hear the question. The old servant did not persist, seeing that his master was sick. Ab-Raham was terrible to see; he was like a man already dead, yet still consumed by a fever even in the grave. Since his departure from the camp he had not taken food between his lips, despite the anxious entreaties of his son, who was alarmed by his father's state. He swayed on his feet, his lips trembled as if he were feverish.

'My son,' he said, 'will you carry the wood up the mountain?'

'Of course, father,' Isaac readily agreed. Ab-Raham went in front, carrying the great sacrificial knife in one hand, the pot of embers in the other. Laden with wood, the boy could hardly keep up with him; for the slope was steep. Eliezer, filled with inexplicable anxiety, watched them as they climbed up.

Even the rocky slopes of the mountain had been adorned beautifully, though fleetingly, with the spring. Between the rocks mint, thyme, marjoram, rosemary, crimson salvias and strongly-scented heliotropes were flowering and making the air fragrant. Over these scented slopes Ab-Raham led his son in order to kill him. As he went he did not cease praying for his own death. 'O 'Thou', he cried out in spirit, 'harsh, breaking the heart, have mercy, that I may die.'

Heaven was silent.

They climbed up step by step. Ab-Raham got far in front of the boy. He had reached the summit when he heard a pitiful, exhausted

'Father! My father! Why have you forsaken me?'

He turned back, and took from the child the burden too heavy for him.

The ancient altar of unhewn rocks had obviously not been used for many years. Ab-Raham swept away the dust, the dry blades of grass, and bird-droppings with extraordinary care. When he had cleaned

the altar he laid on it the wood soaked in resin. Isaac watched him closely. He handed his father the wood, and blew up the柴bers in the pot.

'My father,' he said, 'we have the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'

Ab-Raham started back.

'My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering.'

The boy looked about him inquisitively, wondering where the sacrifice would come from. Ab-Raham covered his face with his hands. When there was nothing else to be done, when he could delay no longer, he struggled yet again and wrestled with the Lord:

'Thou hast no right to demand this. I will not do it.'

'Thou shalt! Those before thee committed the sin of disobedience; thou must be obedient for them.'

'No!'

'Yes! Thou shalt!'

'Come and lie here,' Ab-Raham said in a broken voice. The boy did not understand; so his father lifted him in his arms, kissed him, pressed him for a moment to his breast, then bound him and laid him as prescribed on the altar. Did Isaac understand now? He uttered no sound, nor did he resist. He gazed at his father in painful surprise, with dilated eyes that reflected the blue of the sky. Very gently setting one hand on the child's breast, so that he felt the little heart beating rapidly beneath it, Ab-Raham gripped the knife in the other. He was thinking: 'Those eyes... those lips... Isaac! No, no, I cannot!' But once more came the inexorable command: 'Thou shalt!'

With stiffened fingers he tore open the boy's garment. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, the child opened not his mouth. Only that gaze... Ab-Raham closed his eyes. He raised the knife. . . .

Alas! What power restrained his arm, so that he stood as motionless as a column, with his right hand raised? His fingers opened helplessly; the knife fell to the ground. The Voice, the same terrible Voice, called: 'Kill not mine only son!' That was no delusion of his heart! It was the command of the Lord.

Isaac lay motionless, as though dead. Behind him Ab-Raham heard the sound of steps and the rustle of branches. A yearling ram was caught in thorns, and was vainly trying to release itself. Now Ab-Raham's movements were no longer under his control; they were governed by a will

other than his own. He listened and did as he was commanded, unconscious of the sense of his actions.

He carefully lifted the child down from the altar, and set him on the ground. The boy sat down heavily, for he had no strength to stand. He was still gazing at his father with a look more eloquent than a cry. With those same movements of a man hypnotised Ab-Raham seized the entangled animal, bound it swiftly, laid it on the altar, killed it with a single stroke of the knife, and thrust the prepared torch into the pot of embers. When the fire took hold of the wood on the altar he fell to the ground, and sobbed and wept and glorified God. There, on that lofty mountain, he confessed His might, His majesty, and His mercy.

He looked round at the boy. His son was alive. The Lord had given him. . . . His son was alive, his son would live.

'Go down to Eliezer,' he said through his tears. Isaac did not stir.

'Go, my child, go down to Eliezer, I will follow you quickly.' He took the boy by the arm, turning him to face the track. He felt the quivering shoulder blades, the panting breath. . . . The boy was alive. The fire crackled, the blood hissed, the offering was burning. . . . Isaac was alive. The smoke rose straight upward, the Lord had accepted the sacrifice. Isaac was alive, alive. God be glorified, God be blessed! His son was alive.

'Go down,' he repeated insistently but gently. 'Wait with Eliezer for me to come.' Isaac looked at him inquisitively, opened his mouth to say something, but did not speak. Only now did Ab-Raham realise that Isaac's face was as white as linen and his lips were blue. And at that same moment he remembered whom Isaac resembled even more than his father and mother. That innocent child's face, white with fear, was the face of Cain's brother, Abel, which Ab-Raham had once seen, long, long ago, in the vision that Nergal-Sar had raised for him.

'Go now, my son. When I come down we will ride home, to your mother.'

The mention of his mother convinced the boy. He went to the track, but looked back yet again. With a kindly gesture his father waved to him to go on. The fire was still flaming, the smoke floated upward. The boy's fair head vanished round a bend in the track. For a moment or two longer, Ab-Raham heard the rattle of stones disturbed by his feet, then there was silence. Ab-Raham was alone.

He fell to the ground, and opened his arms wide, as though to embrace the mountain. He did not know what was happening to him, or where he

was. He was floating beyond the ages, beyond space. 'Was it Isaac who had carried the wood up the mountain for his own pyre, or was it some other One, unknown but foretold? He, a father killing his son? Was it only in imagination that he heard the words: 'This Son will not perish.' The Son of Man? What terrifying and incomprehensible Thing was pressing him to the ground? O, wretched, miserable sinner, he knew nothing, he understood nothing, as above him the sentences of past ages were being resolved. He knew only that Isaac was alive. The Lord had held back the father's hand raised above his son.

As Eliezer waited by the asses he was consumed with anxiety. His master's behaviour during the past few days boded ill. He had a presentiment of coming misfortune, and it was with inexpressible relief that he saw Isaac descending the mountain.

'Greetings, Isaac!' he called. 'Where is your father, our lord?'

'My father has remained on the mountain, he will be down before long,' the boy explained. He was walking slowly, not running and leaping, as usual. His face was thoughtful and still very pale, his hair was matted with sweat. Eliezer was alarmed, and, seating the boy on his knee, he vainly tried to persuade him to eat.

'Did my lord offer up the burnt offering?' he asked.

'Oh, yes. . . . A beautiful smoke went up. . . . As straight as a palm tree. . . . You cannot see the smoke from here. Pity!'

'What did he sacrifice? He took nothing with him?'

'A sheep.'

'Where did he get the sheep? There are no shepherds here.'

'I don't know. At first there wasn't any sheep. I looked around and couldn't see anything. . . . Father was about to sacrifice me. . . .'

'You!' Eliezer laughed aloud, but hypocritically. (His presentiment had been justified.) 'He must have been joking.'

'I was terribly afraid.'

Ab-Raham lay beside the altar for a long time. Time flowed past beyond him. At last he rose, picked up the knife, and glanced at the dead altar. The fire had consumed everything, even the smallest and the largest bones. He began to make his way down the slope. He seemed to be returning to the world from some immeasurable distance, and, as once when he had gone out from Nergal-Sar's chamber, he felt that with

every step his ordinary, everyday consciousness was eclipsing the true vision. A spreading cedar reaching to heaven does not remember that once it was a fragile sprout thrusting through the husk of the seed. A great river flowing steadily down to the sea does not remember the moment when it sprang, a slender pencil of water, from a lofty source. How many generations must pass before man learns to reach up in heart and memory to the Creator, his source?

The herbs gave off a stronger scent as evening came on. From the last turn in the track Ab-Raham saw the smoke of the camp fire, the grazing asses, Eliezer, and Isaac's fair head beside him. With a last thrust of the departed horror the thought pierced his mind: 'From now on the child will be afraid of me. . . . He will never again rest confidently on my breast as in the past.' That was understandable, unavoidable, as he realised when he recalled the look with which Isaac had watched his movements. Though Ab-Raham were to live a thousand years, he would never forget the expression in those eyes.

If he could only avoid descending the mountain at all, if he could have remained here, dying satisfied in the knowledge that Isaac was alive!

He walked more and more slowly; he came to a halt.

'Father!' the boy cried joyfully, and ran to meet him. Ab-Raham felt his strength ebbing from him in his happiness.

'Let my lord deign to take some food,' Eliezer entreated him. 'My lord may not be hungry,' he added cunningly, 'but Isaac does not want to eat alone.'

So they sat down, all three, and ate the food Sarah had prepared, and drank wine and water from the one mug. As often as Eliezer caught the gaze with which Ab-Raham embraced his son he turned his head away in embarrassment, as though he were the involuntary witness of something very secret and mysterious. The twilight fell, and the night, though moonless, was luminous with the vernal gleam of the stars. So Ab-Raham decided to ride part of the way through the night. Truly, it was not customary to journey at night, but he was possessed with fear as he gazed at the sacrificial mountain, and he wished to depart from that spot quickly. So they set off. After a little while Isaac began to sway in his saddle, so his father set him before him as in former days, and wrapped him in his cloak. He shifted the knife hanging in its sheath from his belt, so that it should not rub the child. Eliezer rode beside his master, the third ass trudged along behind, by itself.

· Eliezer thought it a good opportunity for talk.

'Deign to forgive your servant, my lord. You should not frighten the child with jests, for he is all ready to fall sick. . .

'Did I seem to you today like a man inclined to jest, Eliezer?'

He said no more, but made the sleeping boy more snug against himself. The servant did not dare to say anything further, and they rode on in silence. The asses' hooves sent the stones rattling. The air was scented with flowers, the stars shone out.

In Fullness of Days

WORN OUT, AB-RAHAM LET HIS HANDS DROP IMPOTENTLY ON THE LID, of the chest, and leaned his back against the tent-pole. Since his recent accident (walking in front of a herd, he had slipped and fallen in the mud, and cows had passed over him) he had had frequent attacks of choking. Isaac, seated on the ground beside him, gazed at his father's hands, so frail and wrinkled, more than a century and half old. Ab-Raham had been selecting the jewellery and gifts intended for his future daughter-in-law, and had been turning over the necklaces and bracelets that had been his wife's, Sarah's. As Isaac watched him he tried to recall her face, her movements, her arms, attired in these same bracelets, gently embracing him. But his thoughts slipped again and again to a picture of another, a girl as yet unknown, the one who would be given these jewels. His imagination saw her as a young girl with slender neck, around it one of these necklaces, and swarthy arms. His face flamed with shame at these thoughts, for he felt that it was wrong of him to let his mother's picture be replaced by another. For his mother was the only woman he had loved so far, and when she died he had been in despair, stricken with unbearable longing for her.

Sarah had died some two years before. She had had a kindly death, and the last decade of her life had flowed past in untroubled happiness. As she sank into her last sleep she had held her husband's and her son's hands in her own. Isaac had staggered with grief; but she had looked at him with eyes expressive of her love, and had whispered to Ab-Raham 'You must take him a wife. . .

In his sorrow Isaac had not caught those words, but Ab-Raham could not restrain a smile even in his grief. Only on her death-bed had Sarah at last agreed that another woman could be brought into his tent. Bending so low over the fading feature that his long white beard lay on her breast,

Ab-Raham had tenderly taken farewell of his wife, and had assured her that he would choose a good wife for Isaac. He would seek for him one as faithful and beloved a comrade as she, Sarah, had been to him through all their long life together. She had listened with childish satisfaction and had passed on almost imperceptibly, suffering not at all.

Her death had been a shock to Isaac. True, some years before, he had had the painful experience of old Noa's death; but now his mother was lying dead, the mother without whom he would not have known life at all. Only a moment previously her eyes had been resting tenderly on her son; and now, even if he had been threatened with mortal peril he could not have raised a hand to defend himself. Sobbing, he had huddled against his father; and at the thought that this adored guardian might also die soon his feeling of loneliness had increased. He had expected his father to give him comfort, but Ab-Raham had only silently embraced him. For what could he say to soften the blow for his son? Although he was so old, and had long since become reconciled to the hard necessities of the human lot, he remembered his own youthful rebellions, the bitterness of his realisation that evil and good alike flee, and that nothing can stay the wings of time. It is man's destiny to grow, to come to maturity, and, having reached the fullness of his days, to see his petals fade, fall and wither. So is it with all things that have living souls. Against that lot rebellion is vain, and some day Isaac also would understand that.

Losing no time in vain regrets, Ab-Raham meditated where he should lay the body of his wife. At one time he had intended to purchase the cave of Machpelah, not far from the city of Hebron, in order to make it the ancestral tomb of his line. The cave was in a field belonging to the Hittite Ephron, son of Zohar; but Ephron was mercenary and had set too high a price on his field, and Ab-Raham had abandoned the idea. Now that Sarah's body was cold and the wailing women were lamenting over it, Ab-Raham decided to pay whatever the Hittite asked. He left Ketura, Mosa, and the older women to prepare the funeral rites, and took Isaac with him to the city of Hebron. He sent Sur's son, Jephon, ahead of him on an ass, to summon the Hittites to close the city gate for the purpose of considering Ab-Raham's proposal.

The name of the old Hebrew shepherd was universally respected, so they all came in haste, Ephron, son of Zohar among them. Ab-Raham greeted them as was the custom, and said:

'Men of Ueth! Before my feet grew into this earth I was a stranger and

a sojourner among you, and I never suffered wrong at your hands. Grant me, I pray you, this favour also, that I may have the right to bury my dead in your field.'

The chief of the tribe of Hittites, Kaleb son of Naim, bowed himself to the ground before the Hebrew, saying:

'We are your servants, my lord, Ab-Raham, you who are known as the Friend of God. Who would deny you the right to bury your dead? We entreat you, bury your wife in our chosen tombs.'

Ab-Raham bowed low to all the assembly.

'If it be your mind that I should bury my dead, intercede for me with Ephron son of Zohar, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which is at the end of his field. For as much money as it is worth shall he give it to me for a possession as our burying-place among you, and in your presence, so that there may be no dispute afterward, and the peace of the dead will not be disturbed.'

All eyes turned to Ephron. He stroked his beard, and his look was inscrutable. At last he said:

'May my lord Ab-Raham, you who are justly called the Friend of God, hearken unto me. I will give you the field, and the cave that is in the field. I give you also the presence of the sons of my people. I give them to you.'

They were all astonished at his generosity. Ab-Raham bowed himself down again. 'Ephron, son of Zohar! I will not accept your gift, for justly would you complain that you had disposed of the field for nothing, and afterward would trouble the peace of my dead. Rather accept from me money for the field and the cave, and I will bury my dead in it.'

Ephron smiled, almost imperceptibly.

'Then must your servant do as you demand. Men of the tribe, ye are witnesses that I wished to give Ab-Raham the field together with the cave of Machpelah. But since he refuses my gift, I am compelled to accept money. The land is worth four hundred shekels of silver. If it seems to you too much, accept my gift, and bury your dead.'

The price he had mentioned was enormous. For four hundred silver shekels one could buy houses and gardens in the city, and this was a strip of stony field, with a cave so deep to be suitable for sheep. But Ab-Raham said nothing, and nodded to Isaac to approach with the bag of money.

So Sarah had been buried in the deep, spacious cave, where there was much space for the later dead of the line; and soon the woman's footsteps were erased from the camp. Her long-past youth, her beauty, her joys and sorrows, hatred and love remained with her in the tomb, and life passed on. The traces she had channelled in others' lives were overlaid with fresh anxieties, and before long Isaac was the only one who thought of the dead woman, yearned for her, and recalled her features, her form and voice. He alone . . . and even he not for long.

Isaac had not yet known any woman, though there was no lack of beautiful girls in the camp, girls of his own age and even younger, such as Sur's daughters, with whom he had played when a child. They grew more attractive every year, like the flowers of spring. Younger or older, they all gave him coquettish glances, and were delighted when they could attract the attention of the chief's son. Every one of them would have bestowed their feelings bountifully on the fair-haired lad who was so different from the other youths of the tribe. Of all the girls the most aggressive was Aina daughter of Hira, a tall young woman, with coarse red cheeks and rather slanting eyes. She was in love with Isaac, and wherever the son of Ab-Raham went he met Aina in his path. She would spring out suddenly from behind a bush, and ask him what he was thinking about. Or she would pretend to be startled by his approach. She pressed herself close against him, trying to touch him with her breasts, and flashing her white teeth at him. Isaac was a little afraid of her, a little attracted by her, fled whenever he saw her, regretted that she was not there when he did not happen to fall in with her, and more and more caught himself thinking not so much about his mother as Aina.

When he went about the camp with his father, gently supporting the old man's feeble steps (Isaac was small for his age, but time had bowed Ab-Raham's shoulders, and father and son were of equal height) his father noticed the smiles of the girls peering out of the tents, Aina's shameless calls to Isaac, and the hot flush on his son's cheeks. And he thought that Sarah was right: it was time to get the boy married.

Although he still retained his old habit of acting swiftly when he had come to a decision – think long, act quickly, says the proverb – this time matters did not go like that. He had smiled indulgently when Sarah had resisted the bringing of another woman into the tent; but now he himself regretted his present intimacy with Isaac, which had no outsider to disturb it. Their mutual friendship, their long conversations were a source

of continual joy to the old man, and he was in no hurry to bring in a third person who would absorb part of the time Isaac devoted to his father. Yet he knew it was his duty to find the daughter-in-law, and at his advanced age he could not postpone the task.

He had long since made up his mind where he would seek a wife for Isaac. In Harran, from the blood of his brother Nahor. He decided that in the spring he would journey to Harran, taking his son with him.

Many years had passed since he had left his brother in the city of Harran, he himself could not reckon how many. The priests inscribed each year on a tablet, so they always knew how many times winter had returned, and how many times summer. But ordinary people, still less shepherds, did not know the art of writing. So they counted the years from some important event, from a birth, a death, a memorable flood or drought, beginning again when some fresh incident obscured the old. And so Ab-Raham remembered only that it seemed to be on the very threshold of his life, though even then his hair had been laced with silver.

Having been parted so long from the rest of his family, Ab-Raham desired to visit it in some state. Ten camels were to carry the gifts, of gold, valuable woven cloths, beautiful weapons, costly vessels, skins, and jewels. Everything was all ready for the journey when Ab-Raham had his accident. As he was helping his shepherds to transfer the herds to a new pasturage he slipped on some wet clay and fell, and the cows following close behind passed over him. He had got up again, and jested at his own carelessness; but from that time he had begun to ail and grow infirm. Alarmed at his father's condition, Isaac had insisted that the expedition should be postponed till the following year. But Ab-Raham had not wished to delay any further, and had decided to send Eliczer.

When he heard what Ab-Raham proposed, the old servant, still active though bowed, and as furrowed as an apple baked in ashes, was terrified.

'My lord, kill your servant,' he groaned, 'but I will not go. I am unworthy! Unworthy! It is not for me, a simple man, to seek a wife for the son of my lord. I am not able to do this thing. Can a frog sing like a lark, or can a hoopoe smell like myrrh? As my lord is sick, let Isaac himself journey to choose a wife, and your servant will watch over him on the road.'

But Ab-Raham did not wish to be parted from Isaac for any length of time, for he felt worse than he was prepared to admit. Eliczer was almost in tears.

'Let your wisdom listen to the voice of your servant. I am old, and hard of hearing, and see not well with one eye. Can I distinguish a girl pleasant, comely, diligent, from one that is scolding and lazy, who will disturb the peace of my lord's tent? They say that the lips of a woman drip with honey, the throat of a woman is excellent oil, but at the end her words may be as bitter as wormwood and as sharp as a two-edged sword. I do not wish my lord to say: "Unworthy servant, what hast thou brought my son?"'

'I am not sending you, Eliezer, into the wide world to seek a wife for Isaac, but to Harran, to bring back a daughter of the blood of Nahor.'

'Deign to forgive me, my lord. Buz and Kemuel, the sons of Nahor, may have fructified many daughters. One daughter is not equal to another, though they are of the same blood. Who is to judge which of them will be suited to Isaac son of Ab-Raham? It is not the servant's part to judge. The father chooses and judges the maiden. Let the soul of my lord not gather in anger at my boldness; but fathers are glad to give a distant husband the daughter that husbands close at hand have rejected. Discharge your servant from this task, and send your son Isaac.'

'You will go whither I send you and do as I command you,' Ab-Raham said impatiently. 'Lay your hand under my thigh, touch the sign of our Covenant with the Lord my God, and swear.'

'My lord, I am afraid. You will make me swear, but perhaps the woman will not be willing to follow me into this land. Am I to return, that you may send your son Isaac?'

'You shall not take my son Isaac thither. The Lord God of heaven shall send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife unto my son from thence. But if the woman's parents are not willing to give her to you, you shall be clear from your oath. Only take not my son thither again. Come and swear!'

Eliezer went to his master, put his trembling hand under the old man's thigh, and swore. Then Ab-Raham ordered him to prepare for the journey. If he did not delay, he could return with the girl before the hot season. The camels and bales were already prepared.

And so, now Ab-Raham was turning over Sarah's ear-rings and necklaces, choosing gifts for his future daughter-in-law; while Isaac, sitting at his side, had pictures of an unknown girl but with Aina's face, adorned in these jewels, and despised himself for forgetting his mother.

Ab-Raham had promised that the Lord would send His angel before his servants; none the less Eliezer was dejected and anxious as he rode forth. He grumbled incessantly at his companions, who included Sur, now grey-headed, his son, Jephon, and the youthful Barach, son of Mosa; and he wished that Haran, the object of his journey, might recede into the distance, rather than draw nearer. While they were passing through the land of Canaan his fear for the treasure in his charge, and the camels entrusted to him, dispelled his chief anxiety; but when they entered the beautiful, shady forests which indicated the proximity of the mountains his former alarm returned. Ab-Raham had commanded him to choose a wife for the young lord. Had anyone ever been known to entrust such a task to a servant before? A wealthy man like Ab-Raham, respected and revered by all the land, and surrounded with the particular protection of the Lord Most High, had entrusted to him, old Eliezer, the happiness of his beloved son Isaac. The trust of the old chief quickened a just pride in his heart, but it could not overcome his fears. He had never known any woman but his own wife, but he had heard much from other men about women's wiles and the artifices beneath which they concealed their infidelity. It seemed that often everything in a woman was false, including her charms and her virtues. She might seem outwardly beautiful, quiet, and industrious, but she might turn out to be a scolding and stinking drone. How was a man to know and distinguish which was the true, which was false? Women are cunning in dissembling, and he, Eliezer, had never been crafty. Woe, woe, if he were made a fool of, and brought back a woman like the wife of the son of Haran, or like Hagar the Egyptian!

He tormented himself with these thoughts, and protracted the time they spent in halts; but none the less, on the thirtieth day of the journey he saw before him the city of Haran standing out against the white limestone hills.

The setting sun was crimsoning the crowded roofs, the square tower of the temple, and the castle. Long shadows ran before the riders. Just outside the walls was a well, and a procession of women was coming from the city gate, carrying pitchers for water. Shepherds were driving in their flocks from the meadows, and the women waited until the men had watered their flocks and departed. The women's white robes showed up gracefully against the city walls gilded by the sun. Eliezer was gazing at them meditatively when a shout from Jephon, who was riding at the rear, drew his attention.

Woe, woe! The last pack-camel, immediately behind Jephon, had broken away, no one knew when, and was left behind, no one knew where. The rope must have been dragging over the ground for some time, for it was damp with dew, and chafed.

For a moment Eliezer was petrified with fury. He would have tanned the negligent Jephon's hide to good purpose if Sur, his father, had not already been doing so with good conscience. Swollen and cowed, conscious of his fault, Jephon made no attempt to exculpate himself. He had simply been staring at the city, and had not noticed what was going on behind him.

'Woe, woe on my head!' Eliezer exclaimed in despair. Though the last camel was not carrying valuables, only the tent, their travelling blankets, and stores for the journey, the loss was quite serious; but above all, there was the shame of it. 'My lord has sent me to bring him back a daughter-in-law, and I have not been able to keep good watch over the beasts entrusted to me. Ah, Eliezer, your journey has had a bad beginning. Now what are we to do?'

He cursed in a voice shrill and cracked with rage, and sent all the three others to look for the lost animal, telling them not to dare return without it. With the other camels, carrying the precious gifts, he halted by the well, ill-tempered and depressed.

The flocks and herds had already departed, and the women surrounded the well, filling tall clay pitchers with narrow bottoms and slender necks, holding about a bucket of water. They soaked thin towels in the water, squeezed them out, twisted them tightly in the shape of a snail-shell, and set them beneath the pitchers on their heads or their shoulders. Then, erect, slender, they returned uphill to the gate. Eliezer halted close by, awaiting his turn. He looked anxiously at the women as they passed, for he was visited by a thought, and he lifted up his heart:

'O Lord God of my master Ab-Raham, I pray Thee send me good speed this day, and show kindness unto my master, Ab-Raham. Let it come to pass that the maiden to whom I shall say, "Let down your pitcher, I pray you, that I may drink," and she shall say "Drink, and I will give your camels drink also," let that same maiden be the one that Thou hast appointed for Thy servant Isaac.'

He hurriedly dismounted from the camel, and stood on the road by which the women were returning from the well.

'Give me to drink, I pray you,' he asked the first maiden that approached, tall, shapely, black-eyed girl. She knitted her brows reluctantly:

'Can you not draw water for yourself?'

'I am travel-worn and weak.'

She pouted her lips contemptuously, and passed on without stopping. The older women who followed her looked inquisitively at the traveller, curious to know what he had wanted of the girl. But he did not speak to them. He pretended to be adjusting the strap of the camel's bridle, until a little throng of laughing girls came along. Faithful to his decision, he asked water of the first, the second, the third, the fourth. They all refused him more or less pleasantly. They thought the old, strange traveller rather silly. The well was only a few paces away, and he was asking them to remove the heavy pitcher from their head or shoulder and give him to drink.

'The God of my master has not heard me,' Eliezer thought regretfully. 'I will ask only one more, and if she refuses, as of course she will, I will ask no more.'

At that moment a young, slender girl approached; she had a face as round as an apple, and smiling eyes. She was leaning sideways under the pitcher on her shoulder.

'Give me to drink, I pray you, from your pitcher,' Eliezer asked, and even as he asked he was thinking: 'She will never agree, for she can barely carry her pitcher.'

But the girl smiled at him pleasantly, and two absurd little dimples showed on her cheeks.

'Drink, my lord,' she replied, with some difficulty slipping the pitcher off her shoulder into the crook of her elbow. Holding it firmly with the other hand, she canted it over to Eliezer's lips. Surprised and delighted, he took a longer drink than was seemly. The water seemed to taste like wine to him. All the world seemed suddenly brighter.

'I regret that I troubled you,' he apologised, as he took his lips from the pitcher; 'but I am very old, and travel-worn.'

'It is no trouble to your servant. Drink further, and I will give your camels to drink.'

Setting down her pitcher, she ran to the well. With great labour she drew up the bucket and poured the water into a stone trough. Eliezer was moved with incomprehensible emotion. He took Sarah's own jewels from his wallet and placed them in his bosom.

'Whose maiden are you? What is your name?' he asked, when she had finished and, smiling, raised the pithier from the ground.

'I am Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel son of Nahor,' she replied as she prepared to go. 'What is the matter, my lord? Why do you weep?'

Eliezer swiftly rubbed his tear-filled eyes with his hand, and brought out the necklaces and bracelets from his bosom.

'Take these, Rebekah; they are yours.'

'But they're gold!' she exclaimed. 'Why are you giving them to me, my lord? It is not seemly that you should give me such things, or that I should take them.'

'It is seemly that you should take them and wear them as an adornment to your face. Deign to tell me: is there in your father's house a place for me and the camels and men of my lord, that I may lodge there?'

She stared at the jewels in her hand.

'There is room sufficing, and we have chaff and hay. You have not yet said, my lord, why you have given these to me.'

'You will learn that ere long. Now put the necklace round your neck, and the bracelets on your arms.'

'I will not, until I have asked my mother. Come with me, my lord, and I will show you the way.'

'I must wait until the men of my lord arrive. Does Bethuel son of Nahor dwell in the house in which his grandfather, Terah, is buried?'

'My lord, it is as you say. And there beside Terah is buried my grandfather, Nahor.'

'I know the road to that house. I will come immediately.'

She took up her pitcher, and went towards the gate, pondering on what she had just heard. Eliezer sat down, very happy, on the edge of the trough. If he had not feared to make a spectacle of himself in a strange city he would have danced, smacked his hands on his sides, and shouted at the top of his voice with joy. O, great, mighty, merciful was the God of Abraham! According to His promise He had sent His angel, who had guided Eliezer's words. "Rebekah! . . . Rebekah! . . ." he repeated, smacking his lips. He had no doubt that he had made a good choice. There was the wife for Isaac son of Ab-Raham! of a truth, he had afflicted himself unnecessarily! Ab-Raham, his lord, was right when he said that it was necessary to trust God in all things and to go one's way, not anxious overmuch about the result.

A little while later Sur and the lads rode up with the lost camel. It had

been grazing quietly in the forest. Fortunately, it had not attempted to roll on the ground, and so had not lost its bales. Jephon, black and blue, looked at Eliezer apprehensively, and sighed with relief when he saw that the old man eyed him amiably, as though he did not remember the incident.

They watered the camels, dusk descended over the city walls. A young man hurried out from the gate and went up to Eliezer respectfully:

'I am Laban son of Bethuel. Are you the lord who talked with my sister, and gave her such princely gifts?'

'Greetings, son of Bethuel! Blessed be all the days of thy line! It was I who talked with your sister Rebekah, and I have been sent here by my lord, Ab-Ram son of Terah, who is known as Ab-Raham.'

'Enter, blessed guest. Why are you standing outside the city? I have already prepared a dwelling for you and a place for your camels and your men.'

The house was crowded with people and filled with the sound of talk. Nahor's family had increased considerably: four sons and three daughters, all married, and all with children. Some of them dwelt like shepherds outside the city, others in their own separate houses; but now they all came together, hearing that a messenger had arrived from Ab-Raham. They did not know their grey-haired uncle, but they had heard much about him. The women – the brothers' wives, the daughters-in-law, the mother-in-law, and the daughters – prepared a banquet on the house roof. Torches, held in bronze rings flamed with a crackle, more to illuminate the unusual event than from necessity, for the moon had already climbed high into heaven, and the night was very light. Old Milcah, Nahor's widow, still nimble though fat, and deaf, led Eliezer first to the chamber in order to show him that the copper mugs and platters he had given her sons still held a place of honour on the shelf. Then she took him to the courtyard, where he saw the graves of Perah, his son Nahor, and a small altar with the stone teraphim. Eliezer bowed to the graves, deeply moved, but forgot to pay his respects to the teraphim, which rather shocked the old woman. Eliezer was unwilling to enter into a dispute with her, for she was a woman and he was glad that Bethuel sent for him to go up to the roof, where the banquet was now ready. So he took leave of Milcah. When he set foot on the terrace, he said solemnly:

'Bethuel son of Nahor. Buz and Kemuel, sons of Nahor, whom I saw

once when they were little children, I will not set food to my lips and will not sit down at table with you until I have spoken the things with which my lord, Ab-Raham, sent me to you.'

'Speak on, we are listening,' they replied.

'Therefore will I speak, sons of Nahor. My lord, Ab-Raham, long since passed the hundred and fiftieth year of his life. His fellows are no longer in the land of the living, he is left alone like a cedar in the plain, recalling times long past. As his crown he has a great experience, and as his glory his fear of God. There is no man to be found equal to him in wisdom and honour. The Lord Most High Himself, the Creator of heaven and earth, has made a covenant with Ab-Raham and has confirmed that covenant in his flesh, which token is borne by all his tribe. God has blessed my lord to make him wealthy. He has given him sheep and cattle, gold and silver, servants and slaves. In her old age Sarah, the wife of my lord, bore him a son, who will be his heir after him; and his name is Isaac. This son has reached the age when it is not good for a man to live alone. Isaac is prudent and serious, and sedate of speech. There is no gold or silver worthy of comparison with his goodness and justice. He respects his father Ab-Raham with a great respect, and so he is worthy of being respected in due time by his own children.

'Now desiring to see Isaac in marriage, my lord made me swear and said: "Take not a wife unto my son from the Canaanites in whose land I dwell, but go to my father's house and bring back a wife unto my son from my own kindred." I was greatly anxious, and asked my lord to release me from this burden, not because I was slothful, but because I feared that I was not fitted to perform such a task. One woman is not equal to another, and how was I to know which to choose? To which my lord, Ab-Raham, replied: "Fear not, Eliezer, for the Lord before whose face I walk will send His angel before you and ease your journey, so that you will bring back a wife unto my son. And if you come to the sons of my brother and they refuse you their daughters you will not be bound by your oath." Then I departed from my lord, worthy sons of Nahor. My soul was deeply anxious, and my road bitter with doubt, for who may know the heart of a woman? God gives herbs both good and evil. A good wife is the joy and crown of a man, she adds fatness to his bones; but a bad wife is the greatest of afflictions. Moth comes from a robe and sin from a woman. But a good wife shines in the house of her husband, like the rising sun over the world. The charm of a diligent, modest wife

is a blessing to her husband. Life is not easy for a man to live without a woman. Where there is no fence, the possessions are snatched away; where there is no wife, the longing man languishes. I was afflicted, and I myself sighed with anxious sorrow. But when I arrived at the city of Harran, I prayed to the God of my lord Ab-Raham, who is my God, and I vowed in my soul: "Behold the women coming to draw water from the well! O, Lord God of my master Ab-Raham, let the maiden to whom I shall say: 'Give me to drink from your pitcher,' and she shall answer: 'Drink, and I will give your camels to drink also,' let her be the one whom Thou hast intended for the son of my lord." So resolving, I asked many of the maidens returning with water from the well to the city, but not one was willing to remove the pitcher from her head or shoulder and give me, a strange traveller, to drink. Until Rebekah, daughter of your Bethuel son of Nahor, a maiden beautiful to behold, and very comely, passed me by. And when I had said my say (but my soul was already tormented, hearing only refusals) she answered: "Drink, and I will give your camels to drink also." And she swiftly removed the pitcher from her shoulder and set it to my lips, then she drew water for the camels; and within me my heart stopped beating for joy, for I saw that it was the will of the Lord God of Ab-Raham. This maiden seemed to me like the rose of spring, like a lily growing beside a stream, like incense smelling in summer days, like gleaming oil and a vessel of beaten gold. I took from my bosom the gold ornaments which my lord had set aside for his daughter-in-law, a necklace of a good ten gold shekels in value and bracelets of two gold shekels and more in value, and gave them to the maiden. When she had departed, I bowed low to the Lord God of Ab-Raham, thanking His mighty power for having brought me straight to the house of my lord's brother, whence I shall take a wife to my lord's son, as he desired. Such is the cause I have to set before you, Bethuel son of Nahor. Answer, I pray you, as you think, that I may know whether your servant may sit down at the table and make merry together with you, or whether I must go hence from this house.'

He was silent; and they were all silent, pondering both on his beauty and wisdom of his speech, and on the proposal itself. From the stairs came the rustle of robes, and hurried breathing, for the women had gathered there to overhear what the guest had to say. Bethuel's oldest daughter, Dinah, pinched Rebekah maliciously, for she was one of those who had refused Eliezer water.

After some reflection, Bethuel answering said:

'There is no treasure worthy to be set above a faithful friend; I have heard the speech of a friend, not of a servant. Of a truth, my uncle Ab-Raham chose a good ambassador, whom it is difficult to refuse. And we have heard many strange things about the god of Ab-Raham, and I would not lightly offend him. I will give my daughter to Isaac son of Ab-Raham. But why should I give my youngest, when there are older daughters in the house?'

Leaning over the balustrade, he summoned his wife to come with his daughters. They appeared at once, for they were standing close at hand. First Dinah entered, then Jessa, and then, with her mother, the flaming and embarrassed Rebekah.

'Is not my daughter Dinah worthy then of Isaac?'

'My lord, pardon your servant's boldness. This maiden refused the water, and this other I know not; this third, Rebekah, gave me to drink.'

'She is still too young.'

'Isaac son of Ab-Raham also is young, and the beard is only now beginning to curl on his cheeks.'

'She is her mother's favourite.'

'The mother's favourite will become her husband's joy and the adornment of his life. Forgive me, my lord, but I will not take any other maiden than Rebekah, since the Lord has indicated her to me.'

'I cannot change the natural order!' Bethuel exclaimed.

'My lord, am I to understand that you refuse the request of your uncle Ab-Raham, and wish me to return with empty hands?'

Bethuel's face was overcast. He did not wish that.

'He who throws a stone at birds will scatter them,' he said at last. 'He who grieves his friend dispels the friendship like the sand of the desert. More precious to me is the friendship of my uncle Ab-Raham than a due order of suitors. I will not oppose your desire. Behold before you Rebekah; take her and bring her to the son of Ab-Raham.'

'May the God of Ab-Raham bless thee and thy line through all its days!' Eliezer exclaimed in delight.

He called down the stairs for Ser to bring in the bales of gifts. But Bethuel sent his son Laban for the finest wine he possessed, and summoned the women also. When Eliezer began to take out and distribute the gifts all the sons of Terah were speechless with delight. First he gave a gift to old Milcah, who laughed like a child, showing her toothless gums, then

to Bethuel, to his brothers and his sons, then to all the other women, and the maiden). He omitted no one. To the very end he left the precious gifts intended for Rebekah. Over her shoulders he flung silks of changing colour, Egyptian muslins as fine as mist, on her neck he hung four necklaces with trinkets, on her head he placed a costly fillet, before her he set scented caskets. She stood speechless, changed, adorned like a goddess. The men stared at her in amazement, the women with envy; since Ab-Raham's treasures turned all their heads like wine. They had heard much of Ab-Raham, but they had not expected him to be so wealthy. Rebekah had a rich blessing. But suddenly she threw off the silks and burst into bitter tears, hiding her face on her mother's shoulder.

The meat on the platters had long since grown cold, and the older women were summoned to sit down to the meal.

'We will feast for seven days,' Bethuel announced 'for great happiness has come to my house.'

Ehzer bowed to the ground before Rebekah's father.

'Feast to your heart's content, but deign to allow your servant to depart, that I may return with the maiden to my lord . . .

'Do you think I am in haste to send my child from my house? You will not depart before the next new moon.'

'As the Lord God of Ab-Raham liveth, I shall depart tomorrow early in the morning. My lord is of great age, and he is weak, for a cow tread him with its hoof. He is waiting impatiently for my return. If I have found favour in your sight, do not detain me. Each day spent in feasting would be as nails in my eyes and a spear in my side. Permit me to depart tomorrow.'

Bethuel was deeply afflicted, and looked at his elder brothers. Occupied in admiring and comparing the gifts they had received, they had taken no part in the dispute.

'What think you of the haste which the messenger from uncle Ab-Raham desires?' he asked them.

Kemuel son of Nahor muttered his reply.

'As you are giving the youngest, it is better that she should depart swiftly, not arousing any astonishment.

'Your words are just, brother,' Bethuel admitted, and at once felt reassured. They began to eat, drink, and be merry. All Rebekah's kindred embraced her, saying 'Our beloved sister. Be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those that hate them.'

'Eliczer is returning,' Ketura shouted struggling up from the ground with difficulty, for she was heavy. 'Eliczer is returning.'

Ab-Raham shielded his eyes with his hand, and saw camels descending from the hill opposite.

'Someone with younger eyes, look and see how many people are with him.'

'There seem to be four or five. . . .

'Then he is not returning empty-handed.'

Ab-Raham sighed with relief, and looked at Isaac, whose cheeks were burning. They went out to meet the travellers. Ab-Raham leaned heavily on his son. Where were those former days when he had himself run swiftly up that same hill, until his cloak had streamed out above him like a wing? Isaac could hardly keep his steps to walk so slowly. Ab-Raham felt the trembling of the shoulder under his hand.

'I will sit down here on a stone, my son, and go you alone to meet your wife.'

They smiled at each other, Isaac apologetically, his father indulgently. The young man ran off briskly; but before long he slowed his steps. Now he could clearly distinguish two women's figures on the first camel, beside Elfezer's, and his inborn diffidence, of which he was ashamed but which he could not overcome, fettered his feet. He stood in the road, hesitant and uncertain. The others saw him standing.

'Who is coming towards us?' asked Semia, Rebekah's nurse, who was accompanying the maiden as once Noa had accompanied Sarai.

'Isaac son of Ab-Raham,' Eliczer answered solemnly.

'My lord, stop the camel and order it to kneel,' Rebekah asked. She slipped out of the saddle, went forward a few steps, threw the edge of her cloak over her head and waited, her hands crossed over her breast, her head bent. And she, too, was possessed with fear, at the thought that the one coming towards her was destined to be her lord for all her life. Now there was no longer any possibility of flight, or choice. She was the possession of the man standing there in the way. What was he waiting for? Should she go to him? Had she done well in dismounting from the camel? She had acted impulsively, seized with respect and fear. All through the journey Eliczer had told her and Semia how great, perfect and wise were Ab-Raham and his son. Instead of comforting her these stories had robbed her of courage. Bowed, veiled, she waited on the road and grew more and more fearful.

Isaac forced himself to go on, and drew near to her. He raised his hand, to remove the veil from the girl's face; but his hand halted in mid-air. What face would he unveil? Slanting eyes and alluring lips, like those of Aina? At times he himself had wished that it might be so; but now, at the thought, he was seized with dislike and revulsion. He mastered himself and threw the cloak back from the face of his bride. They looked at each other, face to face. He saw that she was just as alarmed as he, that she was gazing at him with the look of a captured bird. And at that sight his diffidence departed without a trace. He felt that he must comfort her, and smiled at her in welcome. She replied with a humble, feeble smile. A little stronger in spirit, they looked at each other, she realising that he was a fair-haired, bashful youngster with an intelligent, pleasant look, and he, that she was no saucy, importunate baggage, but a girl with an innocent brow, and lips tilted with kindness.

Eliezer gazed at them both with joy and pride. Semia knelt down, as it seemed to a new servant; but from under her veil she was eyeing Isaac critically.

'Isaac son of Ab-Raham,' Eliezer said. 'Behold the maiden Rebekah, of the blood of your uncle, Nahor son of Terah. Take her, she is your wife.'

'You are called Rebekah?' Isaac asked in surprise; and suddenly, neither knowing why, they both burst into laughter, like children.

'Come, Rebekah,' he said, taking the maiden's hand, 'let us go to my father, who is waiting for us.'

When the time came for Ab-Raham in the fullness of his days to be gathered to his fathers, Isaac sent for his half-brother Ishmael, chief of a desert warrior tribe, to come and take farewell of his father. Ishmael brought with him his three sons, Nebaioth, and Kedar, and Adbeel, all as swarthy and handsome as himself. Isaac stood on the right hand of the couch, Ishmael with his sons on the left. Ab-Raham laid his palms on his sons' heads, and blessed them.

'The God of your father be your aid and guard. May He cover you with heavenly blessings from on high and with the blessings of the abyss in the depths, with the blessings of the breast and of the womb. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your kine, and the flocks of your sheep. Blessed

shall be your basket and your store. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. May the Lord use your enemies that rise up against you to be smitten before your face; may they come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways. May the Lord bless you in your storehouses, and in all that you set your hand unto, and He shall bless you in the land which the Lord your God shall give you.

'My son Isaac, the Lord shall establish thy seed an holy people unto Himself, as He hath sworn unto me. And all the people of the earth shall see that thou art called by the Name of the Lord, and shall await salvation from thy seed.

'All these blessings shall be upon you, my sons Isaac and Ishmael, if you keep the commands of the Lord our God, the True, the One God, who is without beginning and end, and do not depart from Him neither to the right nor to the left, nor follow after strange gods to serve them. Harken to His Voice, for He is great and just. His ways are excellent ways, and His paths are the paths of peace. . . .

So Ab-Raham blessed them, until he could say no more in his weariness. Then he commanded them all to go out from him, even Isaac, and not to come until he himself should summon them. They went out unwillingly, lingering. Ab-Raham was left alone. Gathering his fading strength, he waited. He waited for the Lord to speak to him and show him His face. For the Lord had promised once, long ago, when He had visited him in the oak grove and foretold the birth of Isaac: 'Thou shalt see Me, Ab-Raham, when the hour is come.' And now was the last hour, since death would swiftly rob him of sight. The Lord could not promise and not perform, so surely now he would see him? 'My body is already growing stiff, the dead see no one. Have they their eyes opened in the grave? Hasten, Thou who art the Lord of the life and death of man. Thy servant desires to thank Thee for all Thou hast bestowed on him. Let the hills and the seas add their voices to mine in glory of the Lord. Let the depths, the heights, the clouds, the rain, the avalanches and the thunders give forth their voices. For they also are governed by the Lord. Let all the beasts of living spirit, and all the fowls of the air, and all that grows and adorns the earth also praise Him with me. Let all declare the glory of God. . . .'

Suddenly the old man's thoughts grew confused, they broke off and fell away in alarm. The world and his heart were possessed with stillness,

a stillness well known to him, a sound and uncomprehended; not the stillness of nothingness and death, but the stillness of Coming.

'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth,' Ab-r'aham whispered, and rejoiced in spirit. He felt no fear, nor dread. His soul stood at the gates of the Lord like a well-laboured harvester coming for his reward. Now he saw that the Lord was coming to dismiss His servant, and he waited in peace.

The silence deepened, as though not only was the earth holding its breath, but the sun was stayed in its course, and the stars were pausing on their circular paths. In the silence, the dying man heard those same words he had heard once before.

'Thou shalt see Me, Ab-Raham, when the hour is come.

The Lord departed, the earth breathed again, the wind rustled, in the distance sheep bleated, birds twittered. The old man's heart and mind were filled with inexpressible joy. I shall see the Lord . . . and therefore, I shall live . . . Death is not the end of existence . . . I have been created in the image and likeness of God, from the Immortal can mortality come?

He heard someone stirring beside his couch.

'Who is here with me?' he asked.

Isaac raised his tear-stained face. He could not remain away from his father, and he had slipped back into the tent. For the first time in his life he had disobeyed his father's will. But Ab-Raham smiled at him joyfully.

'My son, Isaac, hearken to my words. I shall die, and yet I shall live . . . I shall die, but mine eyes will see my Lord.'